

MY MERRY ROCKHURST

by *Agnes* and
Egerton Castle



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“MY MERRY ROCKHURST”

By Agnes & Egerton Castle

THE PRIDE OF JENNICO
"IF YOUTH BUT KNEW!"
THE SECRET ORCHARD
ROSE OF THE WORLD
THE STAR-DREAMER
THE HOUSE OF ROMANCE
THE BATH COMEDY
INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS
THE HEART OF LADY ANNE



By Egerton Castle

YOUNG APRIL
THE LIGHT OF SCARTHEY
CONSEQUENCES
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LE ROMAN DU PRINCE OTHON
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Through the open window, out of the darkness, gathered a heavy rumble of wheels; then again uprose the call of the bell, the cry of the hoarse voice: "Bring out your dead!" (See p. 293.)

“MY MERRY ROCKHURST”

BEING

SOME EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF VISCOUNT
ROCKHURST, A FRIEND OF KING CHARLES
THE SECOND, AND AT ONE TIME CON-
STABLE OF HIS MAJESTY'S TOWER
OF LONDON

RECOUNTED BY

AGNES & EGERTON CASTLE

AUTHORS OF

“THE PRIDE OF JENNICO,” “IF YOUTH BUT
KNEW!” “ROSE OF THE WORLD,” ETC.

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To

RANDOLPH HENRY STEWART

ELEVENTH EARL OF GALLOWAY

HEAD OF THE ANCIENT HOUSE OF STEWART

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED

WITH THE

AUTHORS' AFFECTIONATE REGARD

SEPT. 1, 1907.

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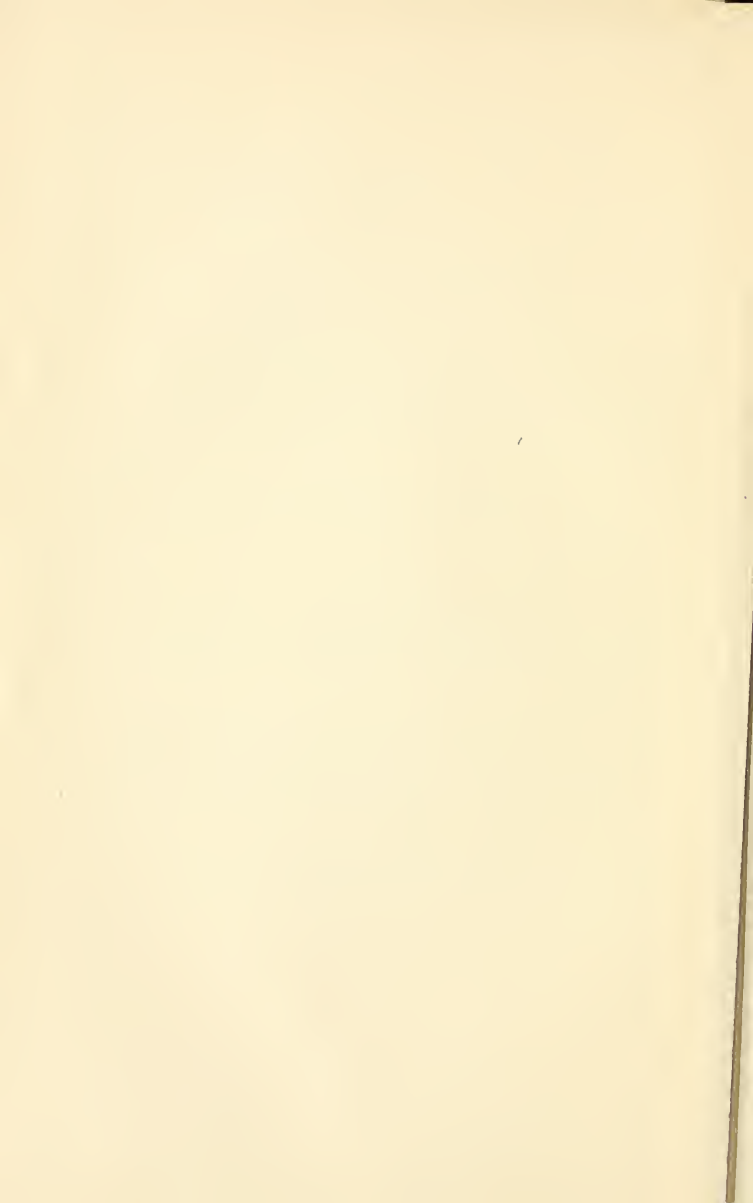
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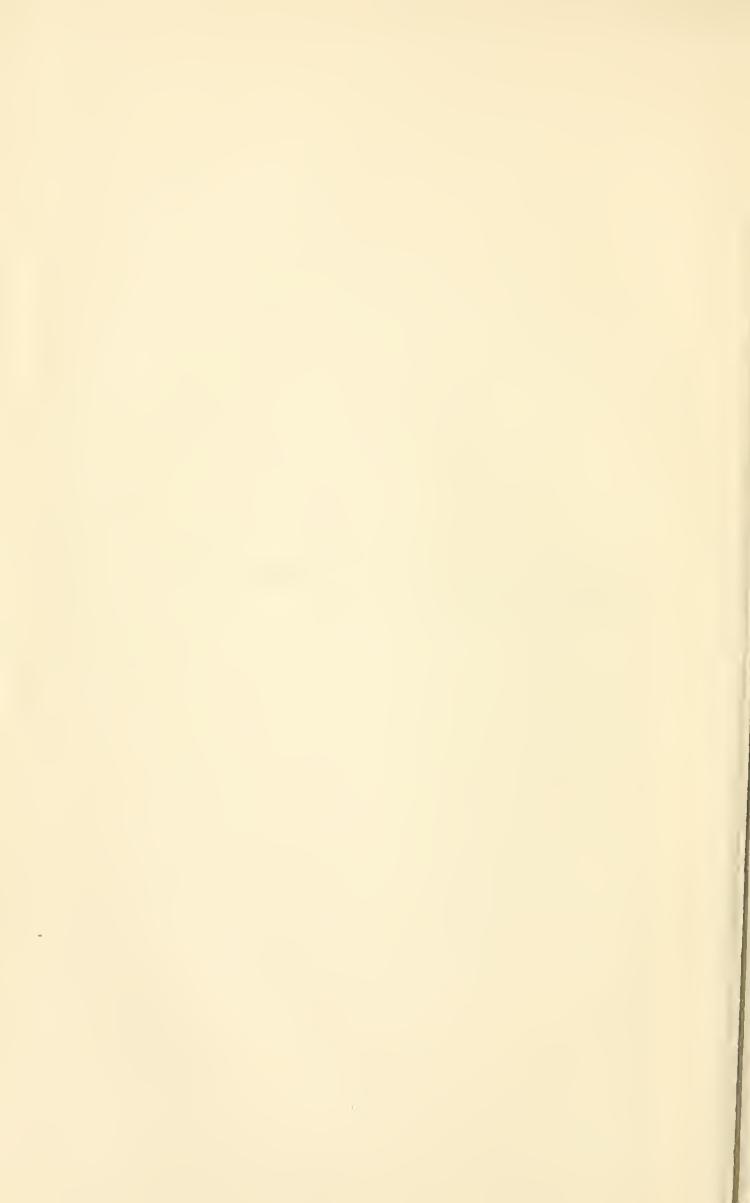
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THE KING'S COMRADE



THE KING'S COMRADE

I

THE STATE CRUST

THE early September night had descended upon Bruges, — “City of Bridges,” — once the seat of the most luxurious court in Europe, now so far away, fallen from its high if not from its wealthy estate. The life of the little town, never very active or varied under the Spaniard’s rule, seemed this evening to have been swept into a stillness emphasised only by an occasional footfall upon the cobbles of its winding streets, some husky cry from a barge gliding ghost-like down a canal, or the far-away barking of dogs on the farm lands beyond the walls. A sea mist had crept from the north, muffling even these sounds of silence, rolling in thicker volumes along the many sluggish waters that intersect the old Flemish Mart and bring prosperity to her comfortable merchants, as it were in their sleep. It hung itself in loose wisps around the carven towers of the Cathedral, the giddy heights of the belfry — whence, as the hours slipped

on, deep bell voices answered clear bell voices, like spirits communing from their heights across the petty lives below.

The corner house of a row of solid burgher mansions, flanking the canal on the Quai Vert, stood slightly apart with an air of greater importance than the rest, giving to the street on the one side through courtyard and wrought-iron gate, and on the other sheer over the water that lazily lipped the green, slimy foot of its walls.

The second floor of this house had been the dwelling of my lord Viscount Rockhurst ever since — that is, some two years before — Charles had transferred to Bruges his penurious little court of English Cavaliers, exiles like himself since the fateful days of Worcester, of Boscobel, and Whiteladies.

In a long, low room overlooking the canal, two men sat together, one on each side of an open hearth, lost in deep musings. The curtains were undrawn; one window stood open, and ever and anon admitted a wreath of the sea-fog that swirled a moment and swiftly faded away. The only light in the apartment was the ruddy glow of a driftwood fire, now cheerfully burning, although the acrid savour that still hung in the air betrayed its recent stubbornness

and explained the gaping casement. It seemed as if the two lacked the energy either to shut out the gloom of night or call for the enlivening of candle or lamp ; as if the paralysing, sodden weight lying upon the world without had laid hold of their souls.

The blue-tipped flames that leaped round the logs flung now one brooding countenance in relief, now the other. Upon the right, the dark head of the exiled King of England, still in the very ripeness of young manhood, would be sketched against the leather-backed chair upon which it wearily rested. But not all the geniality of the blaze could give sanguine hue or gleam of cheerfulness to the sallow, harsh visage. In utter dejection, the long figure — “a tall man, above two yards high,” so had run the description on the Council of State’s Warrant for the apprehension of Charles Stuart — extended itself as if unconsciously to the warmth, chin sunk upon breast, eyes fixed and moody under drooping lids and singularly bushy eyebrows.

Upon the left, the fitful tongues of flame revealed a face of equal melancholy if of greater energy and comeliness. My lord Rockhurst sat forward, supporting his cheek upon his hand. His was a type such as Sir Anthony Van Dyck, some few years before, had loved to fix in his incomparable line and colour.

Like his King he was dark, but with chestnut lights and a crispness in the waves of hair falling upon his shoulders absent from the heavy locks of Charles. Against the glow his profile stood out, fine-cut and pale-hued as a carving in ivory. Older by some years, there yet was a youthful air of alertness about his whole personality, even as he sat motionless, that was conspicuously lacking in the apathetic figure facing him.

Ever and anon his eyes, hawk-like in their keenness and the quick dilation of their pupils, would shift from the wistful contemplation of fire-pictures to the royal countenance, where they would rest in scrutiny, and, it seemed, in deepening concern. Ever and anon, upon the withdrawal of this gaze, a slight sigh escaped him.

Suddenly Charles gathered his long limbs into a more erect posture, and jerking his head toward his companion:—

"And there you go again, Harry, with your heigh-ho's. I fled but an hour ago from the long faces of my lord Gerard, of Erskine, and Armorer —"

"My lord Gerard, gentleman of the Bedchamber, Messieurs Erskine and Armorer, Cupbearer and Comptroller of the Household —" murmured Rockhurst, with a humorous twist of bitterness.

"Gentleman of the Straw Pallet and Wooden Stool . . . Comptroller of the State Crusts! As for Mr. Cupbearer Erskine, he had to-day to pledge in pawn the last silver pot for fear of arrest. . . . Marry! I took refuge with you, who at least, God be praised, never weary me with talk of debts. Yet even you must need treat me to sighs! Upon my soul, a man would no more cheerful company than that of this Court of mine to put him in fit frame for the monastery — How say you, Harry? Is't perchance the one issue left us? There is Royal, aye, Imperial example for it. Do you see in me proper material for a Trappist? '*Brother, we must die*' — Nay, '*Brother, we are dead*' would better suit our case! No Cistercian wall could hold a drearier prospect than this dismal town of Bruges."

He rose as he spoke, and dragged himself with slouching steps to the window: —

"Faugh! the smell of those dead waters — the stillness of them! . . . I vow I can hear the drip from yonder leafless poplars on the bank! Aye, Charles is dead, and Bruges is his tomb! 'Tis no lofty withdrawal from life, like his great namesake's, but a very sordid end, my good Harry. Death of credit, death of hopes. . . . Here we are, in a town of merchants, a community of buyers

and sellers, and we have not wherewithal to pay for a supper, nay, not even for a bottle to help us forget that we have not supped.”

The other man had risen in his turn and approached the window.

“Why, now!” he cried, and his voice in its brisk, manly tone formed a strong contrast to the other’s melancholy drawl, “’tis surely but this pestilent fog keeps Mr. Secretary Hyde and my lord of Bristol from rejoining us with the promised supplies; faith, and who knows? with news that may cheer our hearts, my liege.”

“Harry,” said the other, wheeling round and facing him with something of humour in his rueful visage, “this *my liege* of yours to my empty stomach savours most damnably of mockery. For love of Heaven, if thou wouldst help me to bear it, remember we are but comrades in bad straits together. Here is poor Charles, and there stands poor Harry. Liege? Majesty? Psho! Our own country will have none of us; our friends abroad have failed us; the wise burghers of this town will no longer recognise the value of a signature of mine — and as for thee . . .”

“My last remittance, overdue this month; intercepted, I make no doubt, by Old Noll’s —” Rock-

hurst made a gesture toward the casement : yonder to the north, but a score of miles, perhaps, Cromwell's well-found ships were cruising, as he knew, close in shore. "Well, better luck next venture !" he went on. "Our friends at home — the one certainty in these uncertain times — do not forget us. Sighs ! Did I sigh ? 'Twas at the thought that, though there is still firewood in the house you deigned to honour to-night, there is ne'er a bottle left for your Majesty's entertainment — and . . ."

In eloquent conclusion, the Cavalier pulled out a silk purse and crushed its emptiness between his palms with a smile, which the anxious gaze he fixed upon his visitor markedly belied.

"My last angel gone to the surly porter of Mynheer Tratsaert's house of business this afternoon. I had better have kept it for our supper. But who would have thought that Mr. Secretary Hyde, Councillor, Chancellor of the Exchequer, would allow such lack . . ."

"And who would have thought who knew the fortunes of Charles that he was ever destined to do aught but lack ? The fox hath his hole and the birds of the air have nests . . . but Charles shall not even have a stone whereon to lay his head. Aye — you may well stare, Harry, to hear me quote

Scripture. The waters are at lowest ebb with us, good friend; and like the rest of the world, in our extremity, we turn to the texts."

A moment the elder man stood gazing through the gloom which in the falling firelight was gathering ever more closely about them, at the face of his royal master. Then he said in a low voice which more concealed than betrayed emotion:—

"When the tide is at lowest, 'tis but nearest to the turn."

"Nay," broke from the other with ever-increasing bitterness, "if that is where thy hopes lie, I am sorry for thee. There is no turn in such fortunes as mine, but an ever-sapping drain. Why, there is not a kinsman can afford to show countenance to such a falling house, not a lady in Europe who has heart enough to risk her fate with my hopes. Nay, there's not even a fat tallow merchant of Flanders who thinks it worth his while to risk a present guilder for future favour. You would do better, my lord, to go seek your peace with the powers that be—and for this you have recent high precedent—rather than remain to share the last ruin of our line."

"Sire," exclaimed Rockhurst then, "how shall my house stand if yours fall? How shall my body

keep health if yours ail? Where is my country but with you, or my hopes but with yours?"

Charles answered the steady tones with an attempt at lightness which failed to cover completely a certain tender break in his own voice.

"The more fool you, then, Harry! Easy terms would be made to the Viscount Rockhurst. He could dwell on his fat lands once more in power and opulence instead of wasting them in fines — he could bring up his heir in leisure; nay, he could wed him a new wife and beget him a fresh family, all in merry England."

"My son," answered the other, "is in good hands — and my sister in the farm-house where she hath refuge brings him up even in such wise as I should myself. As for a new wife, poor Charles," — his lips broke into a smile as they spoke the words, — "believe your poor Harry, he is as little likely to seek one as he is to seek a new master — But, Heaven forgive me!" he went on with brisk change of tone, "this outer fog seems to have befogged my inner wits. The house can at least afford us lights. Nay, I will close the casement upon the dull, wet world. Another log or two on the hearth!" He added action to speech, and a cheerful roar and blaze answered the ministration. "The curtain across the casement — so!

Now we were in worse straits after Worcester. Have you forgotten how we stole a sheep and killed it and brought you the reeking leg, and you yourself cut it into collops and set them in the pan? Good lack — how tough they were! Yet 'twas a merry supper. Back to your chair by the warmth, my dearest Sire. An hour's patience, and it will go ill with me if I serve you not a meal — and wine to it — fit wine for the pledge it shall wash."

"Aye, and how will you manage that, my merry Rockhurst?" asked Charles Stuart listlessly, as he suffered himself to be led back to his chair.

"Why, by a fight or a kiss, a laugh or a lie!" cried his companion gaily. "Since the French king has thrust us out to please England's Protector; since the Don neglects to maintain us in proper state, why then, the Don's land must be made to provide!" He took up his sword which lay on the table to his hand and buckled it round his lean figure as he spoke. "A joke will bring a man far along sometimes; or, if not, then a prodigious bit of deceit. I am ready, too, to kiss, my good liege, or kill. Is not all fair in love and war? And are we not at war still, aye, and with the whole world too, — and as much in love as out of it? There are women in this Flemish town, and they

have hearts for a man, or how could even this Bruges subsist?"

He stood in the full light of the racing hearth-flame, the points of the thin mustache quivering with his smile. So handsome, although worn with anxiety and privation; so tall and proper a man, so dashing a presence in such tattered and faded garb.

Charles turned his dark eyes slowly on his friend.

"Art a likely figure, in verity, to go courting the prude burgher's daughter!" he drawled upon a yawn. "Aye, well — off with thee, then, and I'll have a nap to pass the weary time. *Qui dort dine*, as the French say — though my sleek cousin of France would scarce put up with the alternative! — But mind how you play, my lord, with your kisses and your blade — I can ill afford to lose my last friend!"

Rockhurst answered but by a look of affectionate devotion. Then, after a little pause: —

"I will send Chitterley with candles," said he, "and bid him lay the table against my return."

Upon which, he made as low a bow toward the languid figure as if the exile sat in state upon his throne, and withdrew from the room.

In the entrance-hall, dimly lit by a tallow candle thrust in an iron sconce, he paused, and an air of concentration succeeded the spurt of enforced gaiety.

Charles had indeed summed up the situation. The English Royalists, bankrupt of credit, bankrupt at last of hope, the King himself reduced to pledge his orders, even his favourite silver-hilt sword, the royal dinner "dwindled to one dish"; withal the taste of wine like to some receding memory! It would require an inspiration of audacity this evening to provide the rashly promised guerdon. But Rockhurst had a soul to which emergency was a sure spur. He wasted no further time upon reflection, since reflection served but to show ever more sternly that in this night's foray he must suffer chance and his own boldness to guide him. Going to the door of the servants' quarters, he called for the French factotum — a clever rascal, cook, valet, groom, — who, with his faithful English attendant, represented the household of the whilom sumptuous Lord Viscount.

"Marcelin!"

"Monseigneur?" The word rang back in brisk interrogation from the underground kitchen.

"Get thee a lantern and attend me. We go foraging, you understand?"

"Oh, yes, monseigneur!" There was something of a joyous ring in the prompt answer.

"Chitterley!"

"Yes, my lord!"

"His Majesty himself is with us to-night! Take up candles and lay the supper table —"

"Yes — my lord." The quavering response was given in tones of doubt and wonder.

Rockhurst adjusted his cloak, — a garment more weather-stained and damaged even than the suit it covered, — flung upon his head the battered beaver with its derision of a Cavalier plume, and was unlocking the door when Marcelin emerged.

"I have taken the liberty to bring a basket, monseigneur," said the man, casting the object (which was of bloated dimensions) on the floor whilst he settled his lantern to better trim. "Foraging? — Good news, my faith, for it's a weary time since we have had but Poor-John or a sandhill rabbit to our stringy cabbage! Monseigneur has his plan, no doubt?"

"None as yet," said Rockhurst. "But, at whatever cost, Marcelin, we return not here empty-handed."

"As soon die of a knock on the head as of famine," said the Frenchman lightly. "Milord

hardly conceives with what joy I am of his enterprise. I would follow milord at all times, but to-night there is hardly a crime I do not feel capable of after these days of stock-fish and clear water."

The strokes of nine were falling slow and grave from the Cathedral tower, somewhere high above the fog, as they turned into the street. All Bruges, wrapped in her blanket of mist, lay to their will: a town asleep, or soon to be, for your Fleming is a creature of early hours.

The hungry Cavalier had instinctively shaped his course through the High Street toward the Grande Place, in or about which purlicus lay the few taverns that remained open during night hours — dismal holes enough, which brought sighing remembrance of jovial London meetings. But no hostelry good or vile is a place of promise to him who, in the local parlance, "lodge but the Devil in his purse." And much to Marcelin's disappointment his lordship passed pensively on to outlying districts. There was, as he had admitted, as yet no definite plan in his mind; but he sought those quarters of the town where the evening fare was likely to be most succulent. Was he not to cater for a king?

With one or two of the great houses which rose on the quay of the Augustines, isolated from each

other by the length of high-walled gardens, he had had in earlier and slightly more prosperous days of exile a passing acquaintance. Had a forgotten shutter, an undrawn curtain, but given him a glimpse of some pleasantly lighted family repast, he would have made bold to ply knocker and bell and demand a loan, trusting to the hour of mellow conviviality and his own winning address. But not even a ray was suffered this night to send its cheerful message into the street from those carefully barred balconies and windows. The burgher filled himself from his good fleshpots — the English exile or Spanish soldier might roam, ragged and empty, in the cold.

“Has monseigneur any definite purpose in making his promenade through the fog, which — saving monseigneur’s respect — is as searching as the devil? If I might venture to suggest,” murmured Marcelin at last, in tones of apologetic weariness, drawing close to Rockhurst’s elbow, “if monseigneur would visit the Three Flags tavern, or the Cellar at the Sluys Gate, he might perhaps deign to win a few pistoles from some Spanish coronel or some French gentleman prisoner on parole. Then —”

“Marcelin,” interrupted Rockhurst, “the lining of our purse admits of no such suggestion, however otherwise sagacious. Do not attempt to interfere

with the guidance of fate. The night is foggy, 'tis true; nathless is fog more substantial to take into your empty carcass than mere airs. These houses do not present a hospitable front, yet each one holds gold both in purse and in flagon. The question is how to get it. That question is fate's business to solve for us. March."

He swung into as quick a pace as the uncertain gloom and the rough pavement permitted; and, as if his servant's words had started it in his memory, began to sing, not loudly, but in a voice of some sweetness, the air of a swaggering popular Spanish song that was much on the lips, this autumn, of Don John's soldiery.

Hardly had he reached the second stave when, overhead, a window guarded with ornamental bowed iron grille-work was cautiously opened, and a woman's voice took up the refrain as gently as a swallow twitters.

Rockhurst instantly halted, and doffing his hat with gallant alertness, glanced up at the square of faint light, against which a woman's head, leaning forward behind the curving bars, was just visible.

"Hist — " The warning sound dropped sibilantly.

"Hist!" promptly responded Rockhurst, ready for all emergency.

Then through the bars a hand fluttered a second.

"*La llave del jardin,*" breathed the timid tones, in a Spanish which even his own foreign ear recognised as more Flemish than Castilian. Upon which something fell with a muffled clang at his feet: the key of the garden door.

"My soul . . .!" responded Rockhurst in his most ardent whisper.

His Spanish did not go very far; but he had at least that nodding acquaintance with it which residence in Flanders rendered necessary to a Cavalier. Fortunately, more was not required of him; for the house wall grew blank again with the closing window.

But fate had pointed her finger.

Stooping, he groped for the key. It was wrapped in a fine kerchief which had a fragrance of angelic water, and he sniffed with amused anticipation ere he thrust it in his breast. He was weighing the heavy key in his hand as Marcelin crept up to him again.

"If monseigneur had only deigned to inform me that it was a rendezvous . . .!" he thought plaintively. "Here am I very foolish, with my basket instead of good cutlass to keep watch over his *bonne fortune!*"

The honest fellow's head was in a complete whirl. That milord should abandon the King for the sake

of a lady was milord all over, it was true; nevertheless an astounding proceeding, and milord's manner of conducting the affair confusing in the extreme. But his master's next words brought illumination:—

“Look you now, Marcelin, did I not tell you Fortune would solve the riddle? Has she not brought us to the most opulent house of the whole row? And if it were not for the fog, her servant, would that sweet lady have mistaken me for her Spanish lover? Come, now, the garden door must lurk in this wall to the right.”

He moved on a few steps, running his hand along the brick. Marcelin followed, lost in admiration.

“Eh, by the little dog of St. Roch!” he cried, “does monseigneur intend —?”

“Certes, my friend, and to make the lady glad of the exchange,” answered the Cavalier in his quiet voice. “Ha, here is the nail-studded wood: here with your lantern.”

II

CAVALIER AND CAPITAN

EVEN as he spoke, bending to look for the lock, there came along the cobbles of the lane a clink of spurs that rang to the rhythm of a martial tread. And presently a rather husky voice was uplifted into that same conquering lilt—the tune of the marching Spaniards—that had come to Rockhurst's mind a few moments before.

Lilt and step fell into sudden silence at the corner of the house. The newcomer had halted, apparently struck by the sight of the two figures, shadowed as they were through the vapours at the garden gate by the lantern light. Rockhurst's head as he bent over the lock was lit up fantastically. The bold features, the thin, upturned mustache, quivering now with a mischievous smile, the peaked beard, black as raven's wing, and the hat with its challenging tilt and its incredible plume, all seemed to proclaim in him one of Don John's own rakish soldiers of fortune.

The key turned in the lock. The next instant the Capitan (the red plume sweeping over the hat-brim proclaimed his rank) sprang forward with a growl like an angry dog's and plucked at Rockhurst's cloak, even as the latter was pushing the door open.

“Hey, there, comrade!” he whispered, “you are caught at it — breaking into an honest burgher's house! Out of this, sharp!”

“Breaking in, camarado? Why, not at all,” responded Rockhurst, in his own Franco-Spanish. “Merely entering where I am expected, and my servant there holds the light. — Come in, Marcelin.”

He stepped lightly through the doorway, leaving his cloak in the other's grasp. His voice, in the undertone they both deemed prudent to adopt, yet conveyed the perfection of mockery.

“Expected? *Cuerpo de Dios!*” said the gallant, and fell back a step, blank surprise robbing him, it seemed, of all other emotion for the present.

“Even so, Señor Caballero, witness this key. (Up with the light, Marcelin, that the señor may see for himself.) Witness the token.” He brandished first the key, then the scented handkerchief, with gay gesture. “May I trouble you for my cloak? Then I shall wish you good night.”

Marcelin, grinning, stood between the two, his

back against the door-post, the basket on his arm, holding up the lantern. The light fell full on the Spaniard's visage: young and handsome enough it was, though now livid with fury. Still speechless, he seemed rooted to the spot, his black eyes starting, the wings of his nostrils distended upon his angry breath.

Rockhurst waited a second or two, then with a laugh:—

“Marcelin,” he ordered, “relieve the noble Capitan of my cloak: he will understand my impatience.”

The little valet, shifting the lantern into the basket, put out his hand obediently for the ragged garment in question. But here the newcomer, suddenly leaping into active ferocity, made a headlong rush into the garden, and had not Rockhurst by a dexterous step aside avoided the onslaught, would have seized his rival by the throat.

“Come in, Marcelin, and shut the door,” came the mocking voice from the darkness. “Let us unravel this little question of precedence in snug privacy. We shall want your lantern, my friend.”

The garden, tree-shaded and high-walled on all sides, seemed to shut in and concentrate the night's gloom. The sound of two swords, hissing out of the scabbards even as the words were spoken, was sinister in the darkness.

Rockhurst quickly drew once more within the faint circle of light. The lantern held aloft (now in a somewhat nervous clutch, it must be said) revealed the silent laughter that rippled over his features like wild-fire, as he flung himself into an extravagantly truculent fencing attitude. The Spaniard, stamping on the sod like a bull enraged, filled the air with guttural execrations, while he swung Rockhurst's cloak in frantic circles over his left arm. His rapier gleamed one moment aloft, then, low-aimed, shot forward like a flash.

Marcelin involuntarily shouted warning; but Rockhurst, with the coolness of the experienced fighting man, had already slipped from the stroke of death as airily as the practised dancer to the turn of the tune. On the instant he had plucked his dilapidated beaver from his head, and beating with it the menacing blade widely aside, brought down his own steel whistling upon the wrist that palely showed behind the gilt Toledo hilt.

With a muffled scream of rage and pain the Spaniard dropped his weapon, fell on one knee, feverishly shaking the cloak off his arm to nurse his helpless, bleeding hand.

Rockhurst's skill, guided by luck, had inflicted, at the first pass, one of those disabling wounds that

cause pangs singularly disproportionate to their seriousness. He sheathed his rapier with much deliberation, picked up his cloak and flung it around him as it were a royal mantle, smoothed out the feather in his hat,—not improved in any way by its buckler service,—and set it back on his head at the right jaunty cock. He was about to pass the Capitan with a taunting *buenas noches*, when some impulse of careless good nature bade him change his mind.

“Nay, I am sure,” he said, “that our fair one within will support my invitation when I bid you to sup and converse. In your own Castilian phrase: Will you not enter into this your house? — Marcelin, support the Señor Capitan; he waxes, methinks, somewhat weakly.”

And, upon a further spur of magnanimity, he himself returned the fallen sword to the defeated man's side.

Faint chinks of light cut upon the darkness showed them where the house door stood, slightly ajar, upon the garden. And as the trio approached, the feet of the wounded man shuffling along the tiled path, the soft voice called out, in its broken Spanish:—

“Señor Ramon, is that you? — For the love of God, what has happened?”

He who was just adjured answered only by a groan; whereupon Rockhurst, stepping up to the chink and speaking in low but cheerful tones, addressed the invisible lady in French this time:—

“Dear madam, if you will but admit us, you shall have explanation. The Capitan Ramon has met with a slight misadventure, and needs but your smile, a bandage, and a tass of brandwein to restore him.”

“Ah, heavens!” answered she, and the door was flung wide open. A woman, evidently of the rich burgher class, young, and very fair of colouring, stood in the passage, a small lamp in her hand. Her face blanched as the half-fainting man was assisted across the threshold, and she caught her free hand to her lips as if to stifle a rising scream. It was evident, thought Rockhurst, that there were those in the house whom she feared to disturb.

The danger of her own situation weighing apparently upon her even more than the condition of her lover, she gathered herself quickly together; and, imploring caution by gesture, ran light-footed up the passage, beckoning as she went. She thus inducted the whole party into a panelled room, which seemed built at the most distant end from the front. It was gaily lighted by a hanging crown of candles, warmed by a

stove, furnished in brown oak, with dressers and shelves upon which gleamed much pewter and brass of high polish. Upon a table covered with fair red and white napery stood revealed an unmistakable supper for two, with abundance of good things, at sight of which Rockhurst and Marcelin exchanged a deep glance of meaning.

As she closed the door upon their entrance, the young woman drew a deep breath of relief, exclaiming in her Flemish French: —

“Here we are safe! — In the passage,” she added, turning to Rockhurst, “the servants, sir, might have heard us from their quarters.”

The simple air with which she spoke, the round blue eyes she fixed upon them, the practical candour with which she excused herself for a seeming want of hospitality before attending to her groaning lover, gave Rockhurst swift insight into the nature they had to deal with. Here was a matter-of-fact young vrow, not even pretty, — at least to a fastidious English eye — for, with her little moon face and her hemp-coloured hair, she might have emerged from a canvas by Master Gerard Dow, yet with much that was agreeable about her manner, about the gentle irregularity of her features, but above all about her engaging youthfulness. Here

certainly was none of your vaporous dames. She showed no undue emotion at sight of the Spaniard's blood-dyed hands; but, as she turned to help him, was neatly careful to twitch her dress from too close proximity and to push her lace cuffs higher up her plump arms.

After examining the gash with crooning sympathy, she poured water into one of the bright pewter dishes that stood on the sideboard; then, cutting a napkin into strips with the carving-knife, addressed the Cavalier: —

“If you will kindly give him the brandwein — it is in the square glass bottle beside the pasty.”

Rockhurst started from his amused contemplation and turned to the damaged gallant. This latter, installed by Marcelin with mock solicitude in a chair near the table, sat collapsed, with his head on his breast. Rockhurst conceived a shrewd suspicion that the Capitan's prolonged weakness was more feint than reality, an opinion apparently shared by the servant, whose face was wreathed in satiric smiles. And when the wounded man pettishly pushed aside the brandy and demanded *del vino*, the doubt became certainty.

“Wine, Marcelin,” ordered the Cavalier briefly, as one in his own house.

After having drained a rummer of Rhenish, the Capitan recovered sufficiently to roll his head toward his lady as she knelt on his right, laving the languid, bleeding hand.

"Ah, traitress!" he observed scathingly.

"Madam," interjected Rockhurst, as the pale blue eyes were raised in wonder from their task, "your valiant friend refers, I imagine, to your having honoured me with a song, an invitation, a token, and a key. It is because of his failure to understand the right of a lady to dispose of all favours at her will that he met with the little accident to which he now owes the honour and the joy of your sweet ministration."

"Sir . . .!" cried Ramon the Capitan, lifting his olive-hued countenance to fling an uncertain glare across the table. Then, no fresh argument apparently occurring to him, he repeated resentfully, "Traitor — traitress!"

"In heaven's name," she cried, pausing in her task, "was it not you? — How, sir, was it you?"

She turned her childish gaze from one to the other, her blond head, as she knelt, just emerging above the table. For all answer, Rockhurst drew key and kerchief from his breast and pushed them toward her.

The Spaniard drew breath for a fresh compliment. But, Marcelin putting a second glass opportunely to his hand, he plunged his mustache again into the wine.

"Ah, what a mistake!" murmured the vrow, returning placidly to her ministrations. "Alas, what a cut!—it must be tended by the surgeon, but I will draw the lips together and bandage. You can give yourself time for supper first."

She wound the strips firmly as she spoke, though the patient spluttered in his cup, winced, and whistled. To complete the artistic effect she took the handkerchief that lay on the table and tied it neatly over all. Rockhurst was shaken with his silent laughter over the singular pair of lovers.

"Sir," said the little hostess, rising to her feet and addressing him, then, not without dignity: "I know not whom you may be, but your presence here is the result of a misunderstanding. That you may not misunderstand further, let me inform you that I receive the Capitan Ramon at this hour only because my husband, who went off to-day to Antwerp, has forbidden him to enter his house."

"Madam," said Rockhurst, as he rose in his turn and bowed, concealing under an air of preternatural gravity his delight at the simple statement,

"had I the honour of standing in your husband's shoes, I should be jealous of every dog that looked at you."

"But, sir," she exclaimed, her gaze widening upon him, "but my husband is old and fat."

The hard brilliancy of the Cavalier's eye softened: here was a remark which betrayed the logic of a perfectly childish mind.

"The poor Capitan Ramon," she went on, "has so little money and gets such poor fare. I think it but right to help him."

"Madam," said Rockhurst, "you have described my own case. I bless the hour when I was inspired to pass beneath the window of so tender-hearted a lady!"

"Indeed," she said, and her creamy skin flushed to the roots of her hair, "if you will share the supper, too, I shall be glad of it."

Again the Spaniard rolled his glare of sullen doubt. Rockhurst had not lived the life of camps for so many years without becoming familiar with every variety of your *soldado*. He was able, by this time, to read very clearly that here was but one of those ubiquitous "officers of fortune" who, behind a punctilious manner and a conquering exterior, screen anything but a chivalric soul — mercenaries

who, no doubt, will fight when occasion is imperative, but who reckon upon looks as much as upon “derring-do” for the securing of this world’s comforts. The attack in the garden, under the spur of sudden fury, upon the invader of his own conquered province, had exhausted the Capitan’s pugnacity: Rockhurst saw that, in the further progress of the night’s adventure, this Ramon need no longer be taken into account.

“I should be churl, indeed,” said he to the lady, as he sat down at the table, “to decline your gracious courtesy. Nay, madam, pray take your seat; my servant will even pass the dishes. Natheless, if you will so honour me, a glass of wine from your fair hand? . . . I give you thanks. — Marcelin, you can feed the Señor Capitan.”

So the odd supper party began; the hostess unconsciously admiring; the Spaniard all a-frown; Rockhurst rattling his compliments with fascinating courtliness — his heart the while in the bare lodgings of the Quai Vert with his unprovided King; his brain intent upon turning the tide of events to the channels of his own purpose. He could see nothing thus far, but to await the moment when the

Spaniard, sufficiently fuddled with wine after his blood-letting, might be conveyed back to the street by Marcelin and handed over to the next patrol. Then, thought Rockhurst, the gentle vrow would be left to the unhampered diplomacy of her uninvited guest (who felt prepared to wield it as profitably, and justify it as gallantly, as any Castilian in Bruges), and all would be plain sailing.

The astute valet seemed to have divined the scheme, and was plying the bottle sedulously upon his charge. Fate, however, upon which the wanderers had hitherto so blindly reckoned, again wielded the key.

Marcelin had hardly drawn the first sweep of the knife upon the goose's breast when the house reverberated to the sound of distant knocking. The little dame went as white as the kerchief at her bosom; a far greater discomfiture fell upon her than she had manifested at sight of her gallant's wound.

"Heaven's mercy!" she gasped; "it is from the street!"

She ran to the inner door and listened in the passage; the knocking was resumed, from no patient or weakling hand, in peculiar cadence.

"It is my husband," she said then, coming back

into the room, with the calmness of despair. "It is my husband, and I am lost."

The Spaniard rose to his feet and stood swaying, a look of dismay and helplessness upon his countenance. Instinctively she turned to Rockhurst, and pointing to the sorry figure, she cried:—

"My husband will never forgive me . . . no, Josse will never forgive me! He bought Ramon out when they had billeted him on us, last month. He bought him out and I was forbidden ever to speak to him again. I thought I was safe to-night . . . I am lost!"

The thunder of the husband's rapping accompanied her lament with swelling rhythm.

"Oh!" she went on, "Josse told me this morning he was going to Antwerp. It was a trap!"

"A trap!" exclaimed the Cavalier gaily. "But there is a way out, madam, a way out, since there was a way in!"

"To the devil with this night's work!" suddenly gurgled the Capitan. "To the devil, say I, with women and fools!"

His lady's wine had not been without effect upon his wits; but he was sober enough to seize the situation and act on his rival's hint. In three staggering steps he was at the door, and they could hear

him break into a kind of groping run down the passage.

In the midst of her terror the Dutchwoman's eye flashed with sudden scorn.

"Truly," said Rockhurst, as if in answer, "'tis a valiant heart! Yet, madam, with him is your chief anxiety removed. Whilst you play with bolts and delay your lord with fond embrace, we, on our side, vanish by the garden whence we came. Aye, and let out the señor, for 'tis still I who have the key. — Go, dear madam; leave the rest to us."

"Alack, alack!" she moaned, "this supper table, laid for two, will yet betray me!"

"Say you so!" exclaimed Rockhurst, his wits leaping to the humorous opportunity. "Nay, then shall the supper vanish, too! Your Flemish household still sleeps heavily; our chances are good. Madam, before you hurry to the door, you had better put some dishevelment in your attire to show you had but just descended from your bedchamber, where you were doubtless already disrobing. — Marcelin, you rogue, you have a reputation for a smart table servant; deserve it!"

Even as he spoke the hurried words, he had begun himself to toss goose and pasty into the basket and

to stuff a brace of the long flagons securely in the interstices.

There was a stir overhead; the household was awaking.

"Monseigneur," cried Marcelin, on an inspiration, "no time for niceties! If monseigneur will take one end of the cloth, I will take the other. We can carry the victualling wholesale into the garden and there advise about packing — Madam will see to the bloody basin, no doubt?"

Upon these words, with all presence of mind, the valet ransacked the dresser of everything it bore in the shape of good cheer, cakes and ham, brawn and an eel pie, and many flagons (not forgetting the square-faced bottle), and made a pile of the booty upon the table.

Obedient to his suggestion, the hostess had tripped out to fling the contents of the basin upon a flower bed. She came back in a trice, found Marcelin already loaded with the weighty, strangely bulging bag, and with fervent words of thanks held the door open for him. Rockhurst meanwhile was gaily blowing out candle after candle of the hanging crown. Ponderous footsteps descending the stairs proclaimed that the porter was at length aroused.

"One light for you, madam," said Rockhurst;

"you are just in time!" He thrust the last unextinguished taper into her hand; then, his arm round her waist, bending his height to her small stature, drew her toward the door: "Good-by," he said, "sweet hostess. Another time choose more wisely both your hour and your cavalier."

She turned her soft, childish face with a little sob up toward him. And with a sudden stirring of the heart, as toward a winsome child, he bent and kissed her.

"I shall never forget how you have saved me, this night!" she said, her lips upon his. At which Rockhurst kissed her again to conceal his amusement.

The sound of a bar grating reluctantly in its socket rang the urgency of parting. Yet, she clutched him.

"You said you were poor and hungry, like him . . . like him who fled," she panted. "I had saved this for him: I had rather you had it."

She thrust a small velvet bag into his hand, one second more pressed clingingly against him, and the next instant was flying light-footed away. There came a sound of a growling voice; at which Rockhurst in all celerity flung his cloak over his shoulders and withdrew, closing the outer door noiselessly behind him. Marcelin's lantern flashed one ray of guidance: yonder the gate and the end of the adventure.

The three emerged into the street. Rockhurst paused, his silent laughter stimulated afresh at sight of Marcelin, who stood doubled in two under the burden of the great white bag, his basket with the two bottle necks protruding, horn-like, on his arm, and his lantern illumining a grin of supreme satisfaction. Then he glanced down at the purse in his hand — it lay in the hollow with a highly comforting weight — and from thence to the Spaniard, who had begun to crawl away, supporting himself against the wall.

"Señor Capitan," he cried ironically after him, "I wish you once more, and I trust finally, a very good night! — Marcelin, I'll take that basket: we must make good speed."

He halted, however, yet a breathing space to gaze at the great front of the house where, from window to window, gleamed a light on its upward way, suggestive of a bed-going procession.

"This is how we live at Bruges!" he murmured to himself, dropped the purse philosophically into his pocket, thrust his right arm through the basket and, his hand pressing on his rapier hilt, the tip of the scabbard jauntily raising the cloak behind him, started off at a swing.

Marcelin followed at a gay if uneven hobble, occasionally staggering under his succulent burden.

Old Chitterley opened the door to his master.

"His Majesty sleeps," said he, finger on lips; "I looked in but just now, to place a log on the fire: his Majesty slumbered very sound, as I heard and saw."

Then the speaker's eye wandered to the basket on his lordship's arm, the contents of which were agreeably discernible, and to the improvised sack on Marcelin's back, for which the latter's jubilant face was warrant.

"Heaven be praised, my lord!" he exclaimed fervently, as he extended his hand to relieve his master. The tragedy of events had robbed the old servant of all sense of humour. "His Majesty shall have supper to-night; our house is not disgraced."

"Aye," said the Cavalier cheerfully, tapping his breast; "and I have here the wherewithal for many more, an I am not mistaken. See, Chitterley, since his Majesty sleepeth so fast, an you can spread the fare without awakening him, so that he may open his eyes upon a pleasant sight. There has been but little pleasantness for the royal glance of late."

"I will step like a cat, monseigneur," said Marcelin, quicker to seize the idea than his English comrade.

Whether Charles found it not worth while to rouse

himself from the only condition in which he could forget his dismal state, or whether indeed the servants had carried out their task with true noiselessness, he stirred not in his great chair by the fire until Rockhurst, stepping up to him gently, laid on his lap the velvet bag with its snug weight of coin. Then he opened a lazy eye while, instinctively, his long hand closed upon the purse.

The King stared a moment vacantly at his devoted follower, and with a stupendous yawn let his gaze wander round the room.

“Odd’s fish!” he cried, critically weighing the bag; “a purse, my lord, as we live! And a fuller than these fingers have held for many a week! — Am I dreaming, or am I but just awakened from some monstrous nightmare of years? Is this St. Germain once again? — or has fate worked with us benignly while we slept, and is this Whitehall at last? . . . Why, my merry Rockhurst, this is never a goose I behold, on a Bruges table, flanked by pasty and brawn! Hath our uncle of Spain paid our pension at length — or has our Chancellor of the Exchequer chanced at last upon an Exchequer to draw upon? — Harry, dost thou actually hold in thy hand a brimming goblet? Aye, methinks the fragrance of it already reaches me!”

He broke off his bantering tone to add, as he dropped the purse carelessly into his pocket and extended his hand for the glass:—

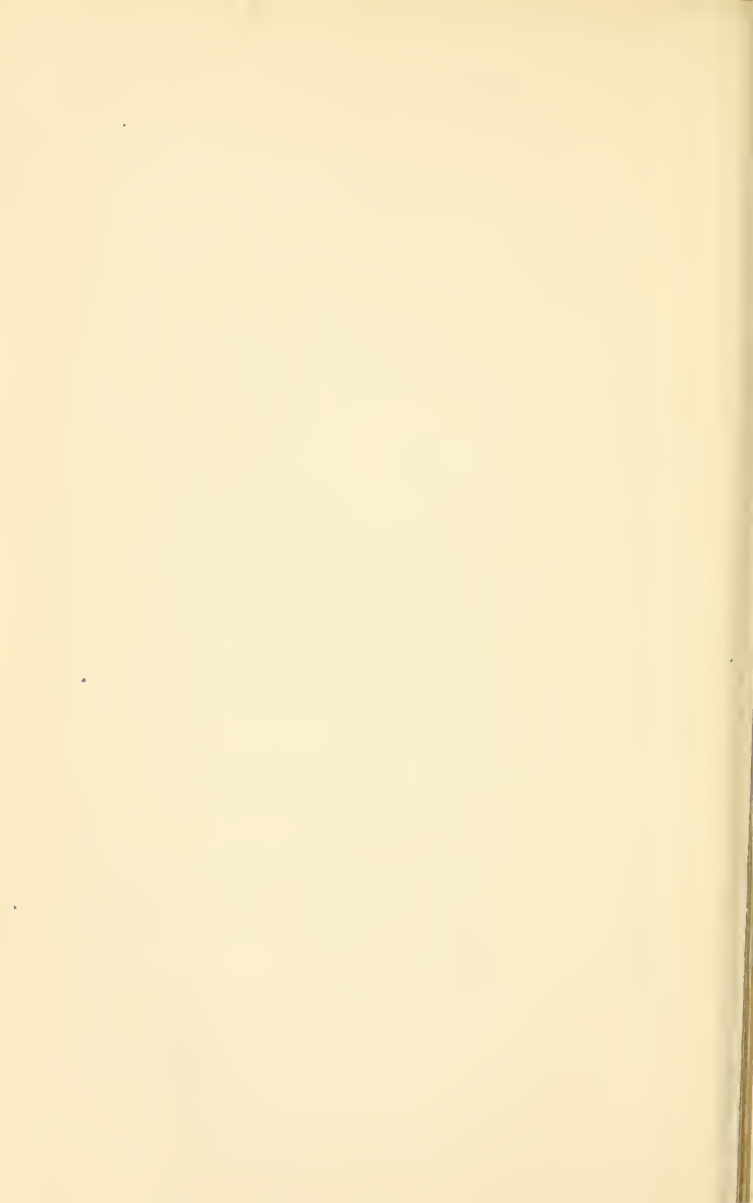
“Nay, but, prince of friends, how have such miracles been worked?”

“My liege,” said Rockhurst, with unmoved gravity, “even as I ventured to prophesy: by a laugh, a lie, a fight, a kiss. The fight came first and the kiss came last—and the lie, I’ll warrant, is even now being expounded within the house of a certain mynheer of this town. As for the laugh, your Majesty, nay, the laugh will be between you and me anon when I tell you the tale. . . . But, Chitterley, bring me a glass of wine.”

Charles, his merriment stayed on his lips by the look of sudden emotion he marked on his host’s face, gazed wonderingly up at him.

Rockhurst took the glass, and dropping on one knee:—

“I pledge the future!” he murmured. “I drink to the hope of England, to your Majesty’s happy restoration, to the triumph of his cause—*Sursum corda!* . . . my beloved liege!”



FARRANT CHACE



FARRANT CHACE

I

FARRANT CHACE

STORM without; and within, melancholy humours! — Without, fine, blinding, dry snow, driven in eddies against whatever obstacle it met: against the walls of Sir Paul Farrant's Manor House: against the holly and clipped yews of his garden: against the serried ranks of firs which screened his estate from the wild blasts that ride from the Downs up the great rise of Hindhead. Never more wildly, never more triumphantly, did the winds ride than on this night of the winter solstice, this Christmas Eve, the fifth since the happy date of his Most Gracious Majesty's Restoration.

Within, a fire of logs glowing under the huge mantelled chimney; rosy flicker on wainscot, glitter of crystal and silver on fair white napery, and a full-paunched bottle or two, dusty and cobwebbed; crocus flames of candles against the rose of the hearth-light and the brown of the oak. Cheerful

enough surroundings, one would have deemed — a sort of room where a man might hug comfort with philosophic egotism and have the greater zest in it for the thought of the outside desolation; sip his glass to the tune of the wind; and toast his legs in luxury as he pictured to himself the circumstance of any poor devil who, upon such a night, still chanced to be on the road.

Yet, as it has been said, the temper that reigned within the oak parlour of Farrant Chace was no whit more cheerful than the weather on the moor. Indeed, my lord Viscount Rockhurst — on his way back from France, obliged to halt by stress of weather at the house of a fellow-traveller — looked more particularly disqualified than usual to wear the nickname bestowed upon him by the “merry Monarch” himself in mockery of his wild favourite’s invariable gravity. “Merry Rockhurst” — never less merry of aspect than to-night.

His long legs extended toward the embers, he lay rather than sat in the straight-backed chair of honour beside the hearth. His head with its chiselled features, worn, keen, witty, was sunken on his breast; his eyes were fixed abstractedly upon the darting flame, his hands inertly folded. For some ten minutes he had not uttered a word or altered

his attitude, and the silent immobility of his guest was beginning to tell heavily upon the nerves of Sir Paul Farrant, his young host.

Sir Paul bit his lip, paced the room three or four times; then halted before the card-table, which stood askew against the wall, as if it had been thrust aside by an impatient hand. He took up the dice-box, dangled it, dropped it; flipped a few of the scattered cards, his eyes ever wandering back to his companion; a hesitating phrase, ever checked upon his lips. Now he went to the window, pulled the curtains aside and peered forth.

"More snow — more snow! Ugh, 'tis plaguey cold!" he cried, with exaggerated airiness, returning to the hearth and spreading his hands to the blaze.

"The drifts are rising higher and higher," he pursued. "No hope for the road, 'tis not fit weather for a dog."

The figure in the great chair stirred, a lazy voice was raised: —

"Certainly not weather for a gentleman."

The other leaped to the symptom of restored companionship.

"As you say, my lord, very vile weather indeed. Not fit for us to travel in, for very truth."

Lord Rockhurst's long eyelids flickered.

"Sir," said he, with marked deliberation, his gaze still fixed on the fire, "I spoke in the singular."

Sir Paul's hand, still stretched toward the glow, suddenly trembled. He had a young, smooth face, transparent to emotion; it grew scarlet.

"And what might your lordship mean by that?" he asked, breathing quicker.

Lord Rockhurst shifted his person to a more erect attitude, and turned his satiric face toward the speaker. The elder by some fifteen years, he had none of the genial gleam in his eye, none of the something almost fatherly with which the mature man of kindly mettle regards youth. — Lord Rockhurst's gaze was colder than the wind that whistled in the leaves, bleaker than the moorland waste.

"I do not desire to qualify you," said he.

From its uneasy flush, the young face went white.

"My lord, my lord! . . ."

But Rockhurst raised his hand with a commanding gesture.

"When a man enters upon a game of hazard with another, 'tis the very essence of honour that the chances should be equal between them. Now, my most excellent young host, had you played me with loaded dice to-night —"

The other broke out foaming at the mouth, with the acrid rage of the helplessly insulted.

“My lord Rockhurst —! I will suffer no man, nay, not even under my own roof, to dare such an insinuation. The dice, my lord —”

He made a frantic gesture toward the card-table. But, like the play of water upon red iron, Rockhurst’s cool voice fell upon his heat:—

“Nay — the dice are right enough — so are the cards. We were but us two, moreover, so you had no accomplice. These are the elements of honest play, as I was about to expound to you — since, indeed, your father’s only son, and a lad of your experience in court and camp, appears to require such expounding.”

He changed his tone for one more subtly keen, as the surgeon his blade at the delicate moment: “But another element in play, between gentlemen, is that one player should not stake against the other sums he does not possess.”

Farrant, wincing, ran his hands desperately through his fair locks; he fell into an arm-chair and, still clutching his love curls, drew them across his face. From behind this screen, after a long pause, he spoke muffled words:—

“Your lordship seems to forget the circumstances.

To help your lordship to pass this time of tedium (since no horses that ever were foaled could take your coach on through these snows); having the responsibility of entertaining your lordship . . . since you can find little pleasure but in the cards . . . and having, in these cursed twenty-four hours, lost every stiver of money, every rood of the poor land I possess . . . zounds! my lord, that I should have risked a few more throws with nought but my ruin to back them . . . damnation, my lord Rockhurst, since but a turn of the dice might have set us even again! — these are hard words, it seemeth to me! Aye, and hard thoughts.”

Thus set forth, his own case seemed to the youth so strong that he lifted his head again and displayed his countenance as wrathful and full of reproach now as, a minute ago, it had been shamed.

Lord Rockhurst crossed one lean leg over the other, settled his elbows at the most comfortable angle the carven arms of the chair would afford, and let his brilliant hazel eye wander to the red embers and become dreamy once more.

For a long while silence reigned again in the oak parlour of Farrant Chace.

A resinous knot in the pine log exploded with

miniature fierceness — a white flame jetted out, hissing, and dropped. The fire settled itself and the ashes slipped away, sighing. In the tense silence these small sounds made emphasis; while without, ever and anon, the blast came rolling up the slope from the far distance, dashed through the frantic swaying firs with screams of triumph, to hurl itself against the sturdy walls, there to break and part on either side and dash onward once more.

. . . So comes the charge of horse against the solid mass of foot with ever-gathering speed, rider and beast together, in one frenzied impetus, to break themselves against the serried pikes. . . .

“Your father fell beside me at Naseby,” said Rockhurst presently, as if speaking to himself.

The incisive note had vanished from his voice. Farrant rose from the table and came towards him, with something of the schoolboy’s mien, who half resents his master’s anger and half hopes to see him mollified. Rockhurst went on musingly: —

“He and I were neck and neck through Edgehill, Newbury, Marston Moor. . . . Until that hour I was young, younger than you are. And in those days I had mighty thoughts. But in my mightiest I never saw myself reaching to his level. If I could

but keep my nag's head close to his, and go where he led, leap where he leaped — 'twas enough for me. . . . When he fell, struck down by Ireton's pikes, I thought the world grew dark. . . . Then I was young, Master Paul. And now, sitting in this chair to-night” — Rockhurst slowly straightened himself and turned his head toward Farrant — “I find there is still something left in me of the old self that I had deemed to be dead this many a year. Enough to be glad to-night, sir, that your father is dead. — Paul Farrant,” went on the elder slowly, “speak : had the luck turned as you hoped, upon what foundation would you have built your winnings?”

The other hesitated, stammered, made a fresh abortive effort to brazen it out.

“Nay, my lord, the world hardly knows you so squeamish. If such rigid rules obtained at Whitehall we should be a dull lot, and many a merry hour lost. Did your lordship say you had charged Ireton's men? By those tenets we might have dreamed that your place had rather been among the precisians. . . .”

A subtle change swept over Rockhurst's countenance. The air of grave severity, the shadow of regretful tenderness, passed from him, to be replaced by the mocking glance, the expression at

once reckless and cynical which, before the world's eyes, characterised the man who had won for himself — among a company of reprobates — that second if scarcely more appropriate nickname of his, "Rakehell Rockhurst."

"Nay, but you're a promising lad!" said he, gibing. "And you'll make your way, my son, I doubt me not. Time advances, old types die out, and manners change. The rules of honour which still shackle old fools like myself would chafe your gallant spirits. . . . Yet, hark ye, without being a precisian, Master Paul, in my day, a man — a gentleman — would no more have staked what he did not possess, would no more have dallied with the thought of selling a friend, than he would have forced a lady. But, sure, what dull fellows are we of the old days by the side of such sparks, such knights as yourself! Meanwhile," and here a wide and uncontrolled yawn showed teeth as white as a wolf's, "meanwhile, excellent young man, I have here in my pocket your signature to so much waste paper — I have it as a memento of a series of tedious games, a reminder of the prospect of another evening, with your company, for all delectation. — Gad-zooks, sir, a man does not invite another to his house, in a snow-storm, if there is a tolerable inn

at hand, when he, being himself green as a March lamb, has only a housekeeper old as sin! . . . The Gods preserve me from the green man and the withered woman! Add to this a cellar reduced to thin Rhenish and claret — a cellar no sane man could get drunk on, sir, and Christmastide!" Eye and voice became even more insolently provocative. "I have known many a one spitted for less provocation."

"Would your lordship find some solace in having a try for my vitals?" cried the youthful host eagerly. His lip trembled; tears of mortification were not far from his eyes. The flier at his dull entertainment cut him more keenly than the rebuke touching the honour of his play. He already saw himself held up to the ridicule of the Court by the Rakehell's unsparing tongue. — Gad, his old housekeeper! his doubtful cellar! He, who had worked so hard to achieve a position of fashion and gallantry, who had plumed himself upon the distinction of playing the host to so high a courtier as Viscount Rockhurst, Lord Constable of the Tower — the King's own close friend! . . . He flung his arm toward the swords that hung fraternally on the wall, side by side, in their royal crimson baldricks.

But Rockhurst's laugh, low-pitched, arrested all further movement.

“Nay, good Sir Paul, I pray you! However you may relish the idea of spilling the blood of your guest, your guest cannot so far forget the rules of gentle behaviour as to cross swords with his host. Secondly, sir, you appear still to have to learn that a man may not fight with one to whom he owes money. And thirdly, now: when I had slain you, think you that your corpse would be more amusing than your live body? . . . Though, truth, it could scarce be less so.”

He laughed again, through his teeth, at his own gibe.

The boy, bated to desperation, stood clenching and unclenching his hands, fighting back the furious tears. The other, his back to the flames, stood looking at him some time in silence. Then, into his pitiless hawk's eye came a gleam of humour — a slight softening of compassion, perhaps. The mind that once yields to humour can rarely continue to entertain the deadly earnestness of anger. Rock-hurst yawned again, drew some crumpled sheets from his pocket and flung them on the table.

“Now, look you, Sir Paul,” said he, good-naturedly, “I care not for this mood. Devise me but something of an entertainment for this evening — an entertainment, mind you, that shall honestly

entertain me — why then, I'll stake again; I'll stake these, which represent your indebtedness to me, against your inventiveness. Shorten but a couple of hours for me, and I'll shorten my memory of this night's business. Zounds, never stare so! Do you not understand? 'Tis your wit for your honour — and the chance of a lifetime to prove yourself a man of resource!”

For an instant Paul Farrant's countenance became illumined; he made a hasty step forward. Then he hesitated, and, in renewed dismay, put his hand to his forehead. In the middle of the snow-drift, with a condemned cellar and an ugly house-keeper, debarred from gambling, debarred from fighting, his brain paralysed by a crushing sense of failure and folly — to devise amusement for this fastidious, caustic nobleman, what a task!

He moved to the window, in reality more to hide his fresh mortification than to examine the prospect of the weather. It was to find that there was a lull in the snowfall, that the wind had rent a gap between the brooding clouds and revealed a patch of starry sky ridden by the sickle of a young moon. Through the swaying trees gleamed fitfully a distant red fire, and beyond it, further down the waste, a steadier yellow light came and went, as the wind

bowed and released some plummy fir branch: the iron-smelting forge of the Hammer Pond! The inn at Liphook! Now, he remembered him, the smelter, was a man of infinite popularity, the jester of the countryside; one who could sing a rousing stave to the clank of his hammer, and crack you the drollest stories over the home-brewed, were it only strong enough. Failing him, there was the innkeeper of the Anchor, at Liphook. Mine host had the secret of a noted posset that his Majesty himself, halting on the Portsmouth Road, had once generously praised. Nay, at the inn he might possibly pick up some belated traveller, whose conversation — he bitterly thought — would prove more acceptable than his own. At any rate, 'twas all the hope he had to cling to. Rockhurst never spared.

“If your lordship will give me *congé* for a short while,” he cried, turning back to the room, “I shall endeavour to meet your wishes. . . . We may not be so destitute of entertaining company at Farrant Chace as your lordship deems.”

He seized his cloak, flung it angrily about him, goaded by the sound of the faint laugh, and strode out. Rockhurst subsided into the chair, laughed a little yet, then sighed and fell a-brooding again.

II

THE LADY IN THE SNOW

THE lull after the squall had left a waste world, dim yet white, beneath a cloud-strewn sky. High among the clouds the wind was still racing; and the aspect of the heavens was perpetually changing, as masses of vapour rose and scuttled before the blast like giant herds: rent apart, drawing closer, scattered again. Thus the land was a-flicker with shine and shadows, and yet lay dead under that semblance of life.

Paul Farrant, astride the old farm mare, had no thought to spare for the new appearance of the white wilderness; scarce even a feeling for the biting cold. His brain was all astir with vivid, angry images. His pulses throbbed with the excitement of the gambler playing for the highest stakes a man can win or lose.

"'Tis now your wit against your honour," had said the Rakehell.

His honour! It had never been to Farrant the

thing dearer than his own soul, which to lose, even to his own secret knowledge, were damnation. To know himself dishonoured meant to him merely disgrace if he could not save himself by his wit. Yet disgrace spelt the most unendurable fate that could overtake one in whose nature vanity played the chief part. And if he failed to fulfil the condition so contemptuously placed upon his worldly redemption, he knew his Rockhurst — all was over for Farrant the aspiring; for Farrant, who was already beginning to be envied; for Farrant, who had once sat at the King's supper-table and had actually been honoured by a quip from his Majesty's own lips! . . .

Drooping her great head, drawing her shaggy feet from the snow with dull, sucking sounds, the mare plodded on her way. He did not attempt to guide her, and she took him soberly to the highroad, then turned toward the downward slope leading to the village. On one side a black line of hedge ran in and out like a ribbon; on the other all barrier had disappeared under the drifting snow. Below the turn of the road was the smelter's forge, redly aglow in the distance; and, something like a mile further, the village where the noted posset might even now be brewing; where comforted travellers, stamping

the snow from their boots, might be capping each other's tales of road hardships and perils. On the sturdy mare, Paul Farrant had no doubt he could reach the further goal; yet he hesitated. The plan which had driven him out into the night suddenly appeared to him ineffable folly. A paralysing vision arose before him: Rockhurst's countenance at sight of Master Smelter, with the black fists, as the proposed evening comrade! . . . He could see the dilation of the nostrils, the haughty lips, barely apart upon a smile. What a tale would not Rockhurst's tongue make of it for royal ears!—As for the inn, were he to find there some chance gentlefolk, how could he hope to induce them to come forth again on such a night, when, in truth, no coach was like to find a passage through the snow?

Through the great silence a distant cry pierced into his consciousness. Heard at first vaguely, it fell in with his thought: the note, it seemed, of his own distress. But in a moment it was repeated, higher, clearer, an unmistakable call for help.

He was in the mood to be swayed by the first impulse, to take the toss of fate. His was not the nature to turn out of its way to assist the afflicted; but now he wheeled the mare round and drove her

up the hill, fiercely, as if his own deliverance, not that of some fellow-creature, was at stake. And, in truth, who shall say that it was not?

On the edge of the road, at its abrupt twist down the hill, stood the black bulk of a coach, horseless, crookedly embedded in the snow. It told its own tale. As he drew nearer, a cloaked figure staggered toward him and almost fell against his steed's shoulder.

"Oh, do not pass; do not go by!" moaned a woman's voice. "I am dying of the cold!"

She lifted her face. The faint light of the rifted sky, given back intensified by the white world, had a luminosity of its own in which most things were strangely visible. Paul Farrant saw that the woman who clutched at his reins was young and fair-favoured. He stared a moment in mere astonishment. Then a thought, devilish, acute, exultant, leaped into his brain. — There was his ransom!

"Madam," he said, bending down over his horse's neck and peering close into her face, "I am fortunate in having heard you. Are you indeed alone?"

"Alone, yes," she answered through chattering teeth; "the servants rode away for help, God knows how long ago. . . . Perchance they are lost

in the snow, dead, somewhere. Indeed, with this cold, I shall soon be dead, too!"

"Nay, madam, you are saved," said Farrant, dismounting hastily.

Trembling with excitement, he tore his cloak from his shoulders to cast it about the slender figure that swayed as it stood; then he swung himself into the saddle again, and, stooping, caught her hands in both of his.

"Can you put your foot on my boot?" he asked. "Nay, then, by this mound. So — now in my arms! (On, Bess!) You are not afraid? Courage, madam, 'tis but a few yards to my house, to warmth and shelter!"

His arms still shook with excitement as he grasped the muffled figure and the reins as best he might. And the mare slowly lifted her heavy hoofs stableward again.

His frenzy lest his chance should escape, his evil joy over his prize, burned like fire in his veins. And something of his blood heat seemed to pass into the half-frozen woman. She stirred with more vitality in his grasp, settled herself with more definite volition on the mare's broad shoulder, and heaved a sigh of returning energy. Suddenly she started; and he clutched her, alarmed.

"My servants!" she said, and turned her head so that her breath fanned his cheeks. Her dilated eyes were close to his in the snow-light.

"Madam?" He held her the tighter and urged forward.

"My servants, sir," she repeated, a thrill of impatience running through her quick utterance. "They will return to find me gone!"

"Why, then," he made answer, driving his heels into their steed's bulging sides, "I will even send presently to the coach, and warn them of your safety. . . . They will be welcome likewise. . . . But we must go on — yonder is my gate — a very little while and you shall be by the fireside."

As he turned off the road he cast a look backward down the slope and noticed a brace of yellow lights bobbing through the misty white of the valley: the traveller's servants were returning with succour. Not a minute too much had fate granted him! But are not the ready ever the successful?

His boyish face was astir with silent laughter as he gathered the lady into his arms upon the threshold of his own doorstep.

III

THE RANSOM

ROCKHURST was roused from deep reverie by the opening of the door. His mind had been far indeed from Farrant Chace and his own unprofitable present existence — as far away as the days of youth; days of inspiration and hope; of delicate illusion even in sorrow; days of strife, when loyalty was an exquisite passion, and the blood that ran in his veins sang to shed itself for his King! Days when friendship was near and dear as love, and love itself the golden fruit of an endless mystery. He was of those who grasp at life with both hands. None had brought a younger heart to his youth; no man faced his fulfilled manhood with less illusion. He had wanted much, he had received much, he had taken much — and all had failed him.

He raised his head and stared, almost as if he were dreaming, at the two who entered upon his brooding solitude; two that might have come upon him out of that long-past youth — the lad with the face of

the friend he had loved, and this vision of young womanhood, whose beauty shone like a pearl from the dark setting of her hood. But as soon as Paul Farrant spoke the spell was broken.

“A ransom, my lord — a ransom out of the snow !”

The twist of the speaker’s lip, the glint of his eye, gave triumphant meaning to the words.

Rockhurst rose from his chair, the weary look returning to his face. Here, after all, was but the degenerate son of the man whose blood had been his own baptism to noble sorrow. And the sapling slight creature with virginal eyes and soft lips who was leaning upon Paul Farrant’s arm? Why — she was but his ransom ! — Nay, these were no longer the days of white-souled Falkland, or generous Hampden, days of chivalrous if hopeless devotion to ideals: these were the days of the merry Monarch, where none could feel a higher sweet than Pleasure, nor feel a deeper pang than Envy. . . . How far away the days of Youth !

She was but his ransom ! And the young man’s words of promise, which had seemed so empty when they were pronounced, “we may not be so destitute of entertaining company at Farrant Chace as your lordship deems,” came back to his mind, and with a new, cynical meaning. Fair company in sooth ! But,

how, here "out of the snow," lured by what prospect of light amusement, what offered guerdon, he could only surmise. Possibly some traveller from the inn, ready with all the ease of these times to snatch at pleasure where it offered itself. . . .

A lady, by every movement of eye and limb. A lady! Bah! was it not the fashion among ladies now to be as eager of base adventure as the gallants themselves?

He stood on one side while, with an exaggerated gallantry, Farrant conducted the stranger to Rockhurst's just vacated seat, helped her to loosen her cloak, and pressed some wine upon her from the neglected goblets on the table.

When the lady had sipped, and returned the glass into his hand, she spoke at last.

"I thank you," she said, smiling. "But, my servants . . . ?"

Her voice was a little faint and plaintive yet, from the numbing of the cold, but it had a grave ring in it that fell pleasantly on Rockhurst's fastidious ear.

"Another taste, madam; we will inquire about your servants anon. The mistress must first be waited upon," cried young Paul, all agog in ostentatious attendance, and ever flinging a restless glance of inquiry at his Rockhurst. "Fie! Your cloak

is heavy with wet. Let me move these dripping folds away from you. And your feet, oh, I protest !” He was down on his knees now, his young head glinting in the glow as he bent assiduously over his new task. “Your feet — ice !”

Even as he spoke, he drew the little doeskin shoe from her foot ; and, as she instinctively lifted it toward the blaze, knelt back so that Rockhurst might see the firelight play upon its delicate shape.

The warmth of the wine and of the hearth had stirred her chilled blood. A flush, like the tint of a seashell, crept into her face ; into her dazed eyes appeared a light to which the blue shadows of weariness on the lids gave a singular brilliancy ; she very simply stretched her other foot for the kindly office.

As Farrant rose at last, with the second shoe dangling in his hand, his exultation broke out. He drew close, and whispered :—

“Say, my lord, shall we not be right well entertained to-night?”

“We?” echoed Rockhurst, aloud.

The single contemptuous exclamation fell like the cut of a whip. He turned, and bowing to the visitor, who had turned startled eyes toward him :—

“Madam,” he said, “I heard you express some

anxiety about your attendants. Our young friend is about to fulfil your request . . . whatever it may be. — Go," added he, turning upon the disconcerted youth. And as Farrant hesitated he took a swift step nearer to him, and whispered in his turn, "Go — to the devil or where you will, so long as it is out of this!"

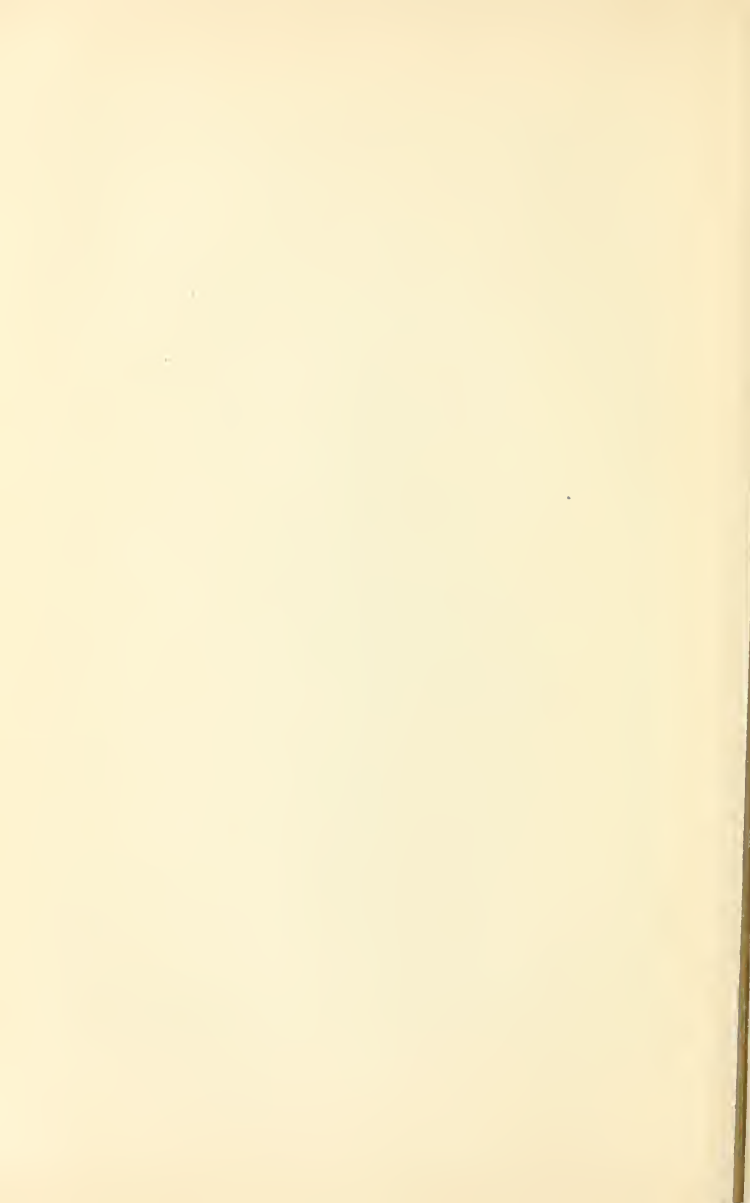
His eye commanded more insolently yet than his words. The young man fell back, flung a look of hesitation toward the crumpled notes on the table; another glance at the lady, his fair treasure-trove. Then, with a meaning smile, he bowed profoundly, so that all his shining curls fell over his face, and withdrew.

Rockhurst caught the smile and the look; and the memory of a dead face, that of his old brother in arms, the boy's father, in its last stern serenity rose up before him. His own eyes were hard as he looked again upon the woman who had been found so promptly willing to come and relieve the tedium of his snow-bound evening.

Diana Harcourt, with the return of physical comfort about her, had begun to feel a strange uneasiness gather in her mind. Country-bred, and country-wed to an old man who had little taste for company, she had yet had some opportunities of learning the



The single contemptuous exclamation fell like the cut of a whip.



way of courts; she, for instance, had no doubt that the youth who had saved her from the snow was of gentle birth, and that this grave-looking being, with whom she now found herself alone in the strange, silent house, was a very fine gentleman indeed. Nevertheless, something singular, something not quite open, clandestine almost, in the situation began to force itself upon her. What was the relationship between these two men? The eyes of the elder, who might have been the other's father, were cold to dislike as he had gazed upon him. And the young man's febrile excitement came back upon her memory with an impression of distaste amounting to repulsion. What had lurked behind his smile, his furtive, appraising glance? She recalled how innocently she had allowed him to touch her feet, and, flushing hotly, she cast her mantle over them and turned her head with a little movement, at once dignified and shy, to gaze upon Rockhurst. But suspicion fell from her on the instant. — Noble-looking, grave, high-bred, old enough to be her own father, what could she have to fear?

"Sir," she said boldly, "will you not have the kindness now to tell me where I am, and with whom?"

Rockhurst drew up a chair and sat him down, deliberately facing her. Then he crossed his fine white hands upon his knee, letting his eyes rest upon hers.

"Madam," he said at last, "do you not hear how the wind begins again to moan outside? I warrant you, behind the thick walls of this old house the snow is whirling in great white drifts. It must be parlous cold without. Here, madam, the firelight is rosy; do you not think we are very well together? 'Tis a quaint hour, stolen from dull old Time's grudging casket. We do not know each other — why, that has a marvellous charm of its own! Let us not dispel it. We may never meet again; and to-morrow you go back . . . to the white snow. And I to the fever of the town. And that, perhaps, will be well, too."

Her eyes dilated as she listened, scarce with fear, but again with the unexplained foreboding.

"Sir," she said, after a pause, "your words are very strange; I do not understand them."

"My dear," said Rockhurst, his languid lids drooping a little now over the first keenness of his gaze, which seemed to narrow his scrutiny to something cruel as a blade, "I have just said it, 'tis a dull world. Will you complain of its strangeness once in a way? Why have you covered up your

pretty foot? I vow I thought of Diana in the woodland glades when I saw the arch of its instep." And, saying this, he opened his brilliant glance once more full upon her. "Diana did I say?" he cried. "Nay, no cold goddess! Far from me the omen! . . . A nymph. Aurora, with the sun in her hair, and all the roses in her cheeks!"

The blood which had rushed violently to Diana Harcourt's temples ebbed away as quickly, leaving her white as the drifts without.

These were, no doubt, but idle words of gallantry; and all her woman's instinctive pride warned her against the shame of seeming to attach any other significance to them. Yet whether glinting between half-closed lids or widely open upon her, the man's eyes seemed to her to have some terrible, some merciless thought in them — a thought strangely at variance with the dignity of his appearance, the gravity, almost the sadness of his countenance; horribly at variance with the grey which besprinkled the raven of his locks.

"I am not of the town, and not accustomed to fine speeches and compliments. . . ."

She framed the phrase in pitiful attempt to stem the panic that was gaining upon her. He still sat motionless, his hands crossed, half smiling.

"Sir," she cried, now angrily, "are there no women in this place? Will you not, in courtesy, allow me the company of one, till my servants arrive?"

"My dear," he answered her sarcastically, "will my company not really suffice?"

Rockhurst had had Heaven or Hades knew what vast experience of women, of the women of Second Charles's Court, whether in exile or in Whitehall. Scarce a challenging beauty of the posy that he had not measured swords with; and, as the practised fencer will, he knew every trick of the play, every line of assault and defence, every feint and every parry. And women, being proverbially unfair fighters, pretty dears! he had a smile as well as a wary eye for the tricky pass and the treacherous thrust. Of all the feints, that of innocence in straits, of outraged modesty, was the most elementary. This divine young creature with the copper-glowing hair and the wide-dilating eyes; whose blood ran so richly and so quickly; who had come in leaning familiarly on the arm of that prince of petty rakes, Paul Farrant, come willingly, it seemed, across the snows, to his bidding; who had suffered herself to be unshod with all the unblushing ease of any Whitehall coquette — why, if it now pleased her to play the pretty Puritan, he had no objection, save that, as he knew himself,

he was apt to be swiftly wearied. The spark of interest kindled by her unaccustomed kind of beauty, by the something fresh and of the woodland about her, by the utter unexpectedness of her appearance and the mystery it pleased him she should maintain, would so soon flicker out. In love, as in war, he had but one method — straight ahead. In war he had been beaten back sometimes; in love, never.

“Come,” he said, sitting up at last and slowly stretching out one hand. “Come, Diana, since Diana you will be.” (Again she started on hearing herself unwittingly called by her real name.) “Be Diana, if you please, to me. What if I am no Endymion? Bah, my dear goddess,” and he drew his lean frame out of the chair and came over to her with the same deliberate grace, “that was a little mistake of yours to be so ready to stoop to yonder youth! Endymion is but a callow rascal, a greenhorn. When such beings as you descend from your high celestial ways it should be for a man! Come, do you wish me to kneel at your feet, as your shepherd did even now? I will, an’ it please you.”

His arms were almost about her, when, with a fierce movement, she sprang up and thrust him from her.

“In the name of God,” she cried, “into what trap have I fallen?”

"Nay, do not scream," he said, at one step placing himself between her and the door, and catching her wrist, without roughness, but with that steel-like grasp she had instinctively divined under his gentle movements. "Let us clear this strange matter between us two, madam. — Answer you first: What purpose had you in coming here to-night?"

"I?" she flashed back at him, panting. "Purpose? — Purpose, sir? . . . That young man found me in the snow, the coach had foundered, my servants ridden away for help, I was perished from cold. Purpose? Let me go, sir. Rather the snow! Oh, let me hence from your horrible house!"

He released her and stood looking at her in silence. Again, even in her turmoil of terror and passion, she was struck by the extraordinary dignity of his air. But to look thus, and to act thus!

"Oh, shame," she said; "you who might be my father!"

A swift shadow came over his countenance, then passed, leaving it set into marble impassivity. His eyelids drooped. Forgetting her cloak on the chair, forgetting her shoeless feet, she thought she saw her chance, and made a rush for the door; but he arrested her with a gesture.

"No!" he said authoritatively. Then, fixing

his eyes upon her with an altered look : "No, child," he repeated. His voice was as much changed as his gaze. Gone from it the dangerous, even silkiness of his first speeches to her, as well as the quick sternness of the last words. This new voice, something said to her, was the voice of the real self that matched the noble countenance.

He put out his hand. After a pause she put hers on it. Later she wondered at herself that she had done so. But there are moments when some poignant emotion tears away the bodily mask, when souls are suddenly laid bare to each other. For some of us that is the moment when our belief in all that is good and beautiful dies. But Diana, in that flashing look into the soul of this unknown man (who had yet, within so short a measure of time, insulted her) read that to which her own soul leaped. The storm subsided in her heart. She suffered him to conduct her back to the chair by the fire, and watched him — wonderingly, yet no longer with fear — as he straightened himself and, with folded arms, stood yet a little while contemplating her.

In the hawk's eyes there was a softened shadow. As he gazed the shadow deepened into tenderness. — He was looking at her as the exile might look at the receding shore of the land he will never see again;

with a yearning that has passed beyond despair, and so grown serene. At length, sighing, he roused himself, and came forward, pushed the heavy table closer to her, and brought within her reach some of the viands that were spread upon it.

"You must eat," he said. And, as she lifted her eyes again with her childlike, questioning look, his lips parted in a smile she thought beautiful, upon the gravity of his countenance: "You have not done with journeying yet to-night," he explained.

He moved to the window as he spoke; and, as he drew the curtains aside, there came into the ruddy brown room a vision of a moonlit fairy world.

"There, too, I was wrong, you see," he went on, speaking over his shoulder; "the snow-storms are passed, and there is your sister moon to show you the way — Diana." Then, coming back again to the table, "You asked for a woman's company. In this house there is no company fit for you."

Her eyelid flickered over her startled glance. She gave a quick cry.

"Eat, then," he went on in the same gentle tone, "while I make arrangements for your instant departure."

The door was shut behind him. Diana involuntarily called after him; but his footsteps died

away in the empty passages. The great silence of the house closed about her; and in the solitude her own thoughts seemed to clamour and crowd bodily upon her. She leaned her elbows on the table and buried her bright head in her hands.

Slighted . . . insulted . . . then served reverentially like a princess . . . looked at and spoken to like a beloved child. How was it that all the anger was dead in her heart, and that in its place reigned this feeling of pain and incomprehensible joy commingled? How was it that her fear was banished, that she would have trusted herself with him even in this house which his own lips had named evil?

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IV

UNDER THE STARS

PRESENTLY she again heard steps without and rapid words; then his voice, uplifted sharp and strong. She smiled, broke a piece of bread and sipped at the wine; she was safe, she knew, where he was. And she would eat, if only because he bade her.

In a few minutes Rockhurst returned. He was now booted to the thigh, and carried a cloak on his arm. Once more he sat down facing her. His eye fell on the discarded shoes; he bent down and felt them.

"They are nearly dry," he said, and lifted them closer to the flame. "In a little while you must be ready. You will have to ride on the same rustic steed that brought you, but I will see that she carries you to safety." He paused a second or two, then added: "The inn — a very well-known, reputable place — is not far distant; and you will doubtless hear of your servants there. Our young host," he hesitated, and his voice seemed to harden, "tells me

that, even as he rode with you into the avenue, folk were hastening to your rescue from that direction."

Diana's glance still questioned, but she dared not put the question into words. What, then, had the young man with the narrow eyes and the uneasy glance meant by her? And how, if he had had some dark purpose, had she been thrust upon this other and left to his mercy? Ah, and what had this other at first fancied to see in her? The blood surged to her cheeks, her lips trembled. Rockhurst held her under his eye. As if in answer to her thoughts he bent down.

"My dear," he said, but how differently the words, a while ago insolently familiar, were now spoken; "this is no house for you. It must never be breathed of one such as you that you have been under its roof — with one such as me. You said you did not know the ways of us of the Court — pray God you may never know them!"

Here he was silent again, his eye resting thoughtfully upon her hands, unadorned save for a single posy ring.

"When you marry," he went on then, as with an effort, "keep in the sweet country, and of a surety," a sad smile flickered upon his lip, "your lord will gladly keep there, too."

She lifted her head with a quick impulse ; her mouth parted to speak. But an inexplicable, invincible reluctance to tell him she was already wed thrust back the words.

Rockhurst turned, and taking the loose pieces of paper from the table, gazed at them thoughtfully for a moment, and thrust them into his pocket. Then he rose, and almost gaily : —

"Come, madam," he said, "your palfrey waits in the cold. Put on your shoes." As he spoke he took down his sword and buckled it on.

She went forth with him, her finger-tips lightly in his hold, without a word, through the passages of the lone house, through the hall. The door, open to the night, cut a square, brilliant silver upon the inner dimness. Cold, pure airs rushed against them.

The mare, black, steaming, stood patiently, her bridle hitched to a post. There was not a sound of another living thing, it seemed, in all the white-shrouded land. She rested one hand on the saddle-cloth, lifted her foot for his service, and he swung her up with practised ease. She felt the strength of a steel bow in his arm. He folded her in a huge horseman's cloak ; then, without a word, took the bridle to walk by her side.

She looked at him wistfully. Had she dared, she would have invited him to share the saddle. But, dark and grave, he went beside her, and the silence held them.

They moved as in a dream through a dreamland of beauty, a white purity beyond expression. Above, in the pine trees, the wind choired; far out over the waste it sighed. Somewhere very far away, yet strangely distinct, Christmas joy bells were ringing.

The starry sky that domed this wonderful world was still more wonderful. Diana neither felt the cold, nor measured the space she traversed, nor the flight of time. She was another self; she would have asked no greater boon than to journey on through all this splendour, with the vision of his face cut in grave beauty against the white world, to meet the glance of his watchful eye now and again, to have the touch of his hand, kind and steady, upon her knee, when the road was rougher and the mare stumbled. She knew that at that unknown inn door, down in the valley, would come the parting, and her heart contracted.

The little village seemed asleep. The inn itself looked deep in slumber, with barred windows, its

every gable huddled under the thick blanket of snow; only a wreathing smoke from the chimney-stack to tell of some watchfulness within.

Rockhurst knocked, masterfully, sonorously. Then turning, the rein slung over his arm, he leaned against a pillar of the porch, removed his hat, and looked up smiling at her. There came sounds, answering sounds, indoor. Then he spoke: —

"Thank you," he said.

"Do you thank me?" Her voice shook a little.

"Thank you," he repeated, "for having shown me, once more, a vision of my youth such as I never thought to know again!"

The bars were now heard grating against the closed door. Rockhurst took a step forward. She read farewell in his eyes; and, flinging out both her hands, almost with a sob: —

"Ah, but shall we not meet again?" she said pleadingly. "Your name? Mine — nay, you know it already. It is indeed Diana. Diana —"

But he interrupted her with a quick gesture.

"Hush! My name? No, it is a name of no good report, and I would not have it dwell in your mind. And yours — it were best I should not know it. . . ." Then, after a slight pause: "You come as a dream to me, you go as a dream,

perfect, sweet, beyond words. We shall never meet again, Diana."

The inn doors were slowly drawing apart. He lifted his arms to help her down, held her a second between them to steady her, then, putting her gently aside, sprang into the saddle and forthwith spurred the mare to her heavy trot.

And Diana, looking after them, saw rider and mount passing from her, black against the snow. He never turned his head. She stood, bewilderment in her mind, pain at her heart.

"God-a-mercy, madam, 'tis you!" cried the familiar voice of her old servant in her ear. "In the Lord's name, madam, where have you been?" old Geoffrey was tremblingly questioning.

She started, looked round at him as one suddenly awakened. Was it all indeed a dream of the snow? she asked herself, as the sheltering doors of the Anchor, at Liphook, closed upon her.

The sudden spurt of old Bess the mare soon gave place to her usual jog. Through the silent snow she carried her rider back to the door of Farrant Chace. The rhythmic jingle of her bit, the monotonous muffled plunge of her hoofs, the wail of the wind over the down, seemed to point the wide

stillness, even as the sparse black firs pointed the immense whiteness of the waste.

Rockhurst stepped in again into the warmth of the parlour, snow sodden on his boots, hoar frost pricking his hair, and found Paul Farrant.

To the young man's frenzied anxiety it seemed interminable nights that he had been thus waiting, waiting for release or doom; nights that he had paced the brown parlour from end to end; that he had stood shivering in the window recess, gazing out upon the white emptiness, straining his ears for a sound of life in the awful stillness. The uncertainty of Rockhurst's moods, of his intentions, the mystery that had to-night surrounded his movements, added to the waiting misery. To what end had Rakehell set forth, at midnight through the snow, with the lady whom he had so cynically received? Was it a sudden whim of chivalrous courtesy? His scorching anger upon their last brief meeting might lead him to that preposterous conclusion — Knight Errant Rakehell, out through the snowdrifts on a farm mare for the sake of country virtue! (What tale might he not make of it for supper merriment at Whitehall!) Or Rakehell, jealous of his host's fair looks and smooth cheek,

carrying off elsewhere the prize of grace and beauty. . . .

At such a point Farrant's uneasy tread would lead him back to the hearth, to seek vain comfort by the embers, to fling fresh logs on the reddening pile. What was he to do if Rockhurst were to pass away from his road like this? Dare he, so long as those damning notes were in that pitiless hold, ever present himself within earshot of Court?

Then all at once, as he sat staring into his uncertain future, his guest was back upon him — those were his steps without, that was his hand on the latch! Farrant sprang to his feet, and flung a look of piteous inquiry at the great lord's face.

Rockhurst did not speak. He went to the hearth and stood for an appreciable pause gazing at the lad; in his eyes there was none of the former scorn — nothing but a kind of sad wonder. Then, deliberately, he drew the damning slips of paper from his pocket, turned, and, one by one, with a musing air, threw them into the fire.

Farrant drew a quivering breath of relief. The "debt of honour" was cancelled.



THE ENIGMA OF THE LOCKET



THE ENIGMA OF THE LOCKET

I

LITTLE SATAN

ENGUERRAND DE JONCELLES—*Monsieur le Vidame de Joncelles*, as he preferred to be called—was new to courts. To the court of Whitehall, *la cour de Witalle* he had it, he was yet altogether a stranger.

From the noble monotony of Joncelles, the great poverty-stricken chateau which raised its pepper-box turrets above meagre apple orchards, a league south of Caen, to the excitement of the Louvre and Versailles; from the rigidity of the maternal rule at home (in her retirement, Madame de Joncelles, a confidant and friend of the late Queen Mother of France, had never compromised on matters of discipline, and had cherished theories on the education of young men) to complete emancipation—here had been steps high enough to upset the balance of any quick-blooded and good-looking youth of eighteen. But the little Vidame had found his feet, as the saying goes, with astonishing ease, as soon as

the austere old lady, departing for a better world, left him to face this one by himself.

The new mourning had scarce had time to be fitted to his comely figure before the whole youth himself had become a different being. There are some whom a single glass of wine intoxicates; Enguerand de Joncelles was intoxicated at the very first sip of life. . . . Such a flutter of silk and curls; such constellations of eyes, brilliant or melting or mockingly challenging; such lightning of wit; such whispers, such sighs! In one day he had learned to return, with interest, an *æillade* that, within the precincts of Caen Cathedral, would have made him drop a modest lid — and set him dreaming for a week. Within a very little while more he had mastered the art of capturing a soft hand and holding it hidden in tender pressure, the while presenting a decorous front to stately company. He had also learned to look down in the right measure of disdain upon the burgher; to bandy, in all delicacy, audacious pleasantry with his equals on the Grand Staircase of the Louvre, or in the *Galérie de l'Œil-de-Bœuf*. He could whip out his new-mode small-sword with as swift a grace as the best noted ruffler. He was able to be more obviously dazzled by the splendour of the *Roy-Soleil* than many a past-

master sycophant — withal cultivating a fine insensibility of outward aspect, keeping the delicate beauty of his features set as in a fine white mask, his voice low-toned — only now and again permitting the wide-pupilled black eyes to betray by a flash the constant alertness of the inner mind.

These demure airs gave a singular piquancy to the boldness of his words and deeds, one which was not without its special effect in that court of solemn sham and wearisome etiquette. Heaven only knows where the precious only son of Madame de Joncelles had found such sudden knowledge of the world, such astuteness and such recklessness combined. It was a merciful Providence that spared his pious mother the sight of the ultimate blossoming of her carefully pruned young tree!

Attached (together with his sister, Madame de Mantes, a noted beauty of Versailles) to the train of Madame Henriette d'Orléans, on the occasion of that princess's first journey to England since the happy restoration of her royal brother, he now was ushered to the court of Whitehall. What the apt youth here saw and learned filled him deep with surprise — a surprise, however, which he was careful not to betray. Beyond doubt it was a merry place, this court of Charles — if its methods were a trifle

astonishing. Enguerrand was not one who would let pass a single opportunity for self-instruction, and now and again, despite his impassive attitude where the natural acuteness of his wits failed him, he condescended to ask for information.

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He was in a questioning mood, this night at Whitehall, when, for the first time, he was admitted to the King's more private circle. By good adventure, he found himself beside a gentleman who seemed to possess an intimate knowledge of the royal ways as well as an amiable readiness to impart it. This was an elderly little man of the name of Petherick, who once, evidently, had been handsome, and was still *à la mode*. As Enguerrand was to learn later, Mr. Petherick justified his established position at Court by a notable ingenuity in discovering fresh sources of amusement for the easily wearied Charles. Now the acute person's eye rested critically upon the elegance of the foreign boy; his Majesty liked new faces and new fashions, and his Majesty especially liked the French.

"Aye," said Petherick, as if pursuing his thought aloud, "the King is vastly fond of your country, Vidame — and of your countrywomen, just now. See — that divine dark creature that came with

Madame Henriette; I've laid a wager, to wit, that her Royal Highness will have to leave her lady-in-waiting behind, when she returns to France."

"Sir — you mean, I see, Madame de Mantes," said Enguerrand, coolly. "My sister."

"Monsieur de Joncelles . . . ? Ah, of course, Madame de Mantes is married. And M. de Mantes?"

"Say was married — happily widowed within a few months," said the little Vidame, with elaborate coolness. And from his post slightly in the background he gazed at the brilliant royal circle and singled out the familiar dark curly head, the peach-like cheek, the childlike lustrous eyes with quite a new interest.

Mr. Petherick had too good an experience of the Court not to be more than ever gracious to a newcomer, who proved to be the brother of a beauteous sister.

Following the direction of the Vidame's eyes, he pointed out the personalities of major importance — handsome Castlemaine, sullen and aggressive tonight; and fair Stewart with her childish face and her studied coldness of demeanour, and put Master Enguerrand *au courant* of some spicy snippets. Buckingham proclaimed himself by his magnificence, his insolence, and his gaiety.

"But pray," put in the Vidame, "who may the tall, dark gentleman be, who sits in such silence behind his Majesty, and who, even when the King speaks, seems to have forgot how to smile. . . . He has a handsome presence — although no longer young, at all." (Thus, the superb arrogance of his own springtime!) "Do you mark, Monsieur Petherick, how my little sister keeps seeking his notice with languishing eyes — aye, even with his Majesty's own gaze upon her . . . the perverse one! Pray, who is the gentleman?"

"How!" cried Mr. Petherick, "a whole week already in Whitehall, and not yet acquainted with the Rakehell? Why, sir, it is our King's own familiar, an old comrade of the wars and of exile. His Majesty can do nought without my lord Viscount Rockhurst — my merry Rockhurst, he has dubbed his lordship, in a raillery, you will understand, of that countenance which keeps its gravity through the maddest freak. And mad he can be, sir; hence that nickname of Rakehell, which no doubt has astonished your French elegancy. — Nay, but in truth there is an eye that wanders, as you say, prodigious languorously upon my lord Constable!" Mr. Petherick went on, narrowing his own watchful gaze: "I congratulate you, Vidame, upon your fair

sister . . . yet, I trust she is as wise as she is fair. . . . Ayè, you say true, and your young wits are quicker than mine; the Lord Constable—my lord Rockhurst is constable, I should inform you, of his Majesty's Tower and captain of the Yeomen of the Guard—and in sooth the one gentleman about the presence who would dare, and for the mere deviltry of it, to place himself in rivalry with the King . . . to nip the quarry, as it were, from under Old Rowley's nose!"

"Old Rowley?" questioned Enguerrand, his dark eyes flashing wide. He had a side smile, as he spoke, for his sister and her astuteness. He could trust Jeanne to be wise.

Petherick coughed behind a lean hand.

"Oh, a name, sir. A name, by which his Majesty's intimates dare, now and then, to call him—a hem! when not in the presence—a foolish habit. I know not how the absurdity slipped from my tongue."

"Nay, neither do I," said the little cool Vidame.

His glance wandered back with sharper set curiosity to the royal circle. Charles had a languid hand amid the curls of the proud, fair beauty, who sat, erect and triumphant, beside him; the young courtier's thoughts ran back to his own gorgeous

monarch, set up as upon an altar, never to be approached save with bent spine, with double-distilled compliments, spoken of with awe, in whispers, as befitted his august essence. *Le Roy Soleil* . . .
v Old Rowley !

Jeanne de Mantes had a pretty, round face with a pointed chin, wide-set, very innocent dark eyes, piquantly contradicted by the dainty, wicked mouth, by every vivacious art and grace that proclaimed one deeply learned already in the art of pleasing. Charles, in truth, looked more often to-night at his sister's pretty *dame d'honneur* than at the blond, chill beauty who sat at his right hand; and presently, as he looked, the King's sardonic face relaxed into a smile. He leaned forward and addressed the lady in French:—

“I hear mounts and marvels, madam, of your skill upon the guitar. Will you not pleasure us with some sweet air of your fingers?”

Instantly every glance fell upon the Frenchwoman; and she, with a start, brought her eyes from their absent fixing of the Lord Constable to the visage of the King. She fluttered. She smiled:—

“Your Majesty commands? ’Tis scarce worthy of such ears.”

Curiously enough the guitar had been brought to-night, by the wish of Madame herself, who deemed that his Majesty might be pleased to hear it. She stretched out a white hand, half turning the head with its wreath of soft black curls toward the young man behind her: —

“My brother! . . . Vidame!”

It was a languid, sweet call, like the pipe of a waking bird, which augured well for the louder warble. The Vidame was alert; in a twinkling he was at his sister's side, presenting the guitar with the arrogant grace peculiar to him.

But Charles, full of that curious interest in small things which seems so marked a characteristic of sovereigns — their lives being by fate ordained in view of wide issues — signified by a gesture his desire to examine the new-fashioned instrument, and the Vidame approached the presence.

The silent, grave personage whose seat behind the King, apart from the table, threw him into shadow, looked at the young man at first with indifference; then, of a sudden, piercingly.

With one arm thrown familiarly on the back of the royal chair, he had shown himself mighty indifferent either to the challenging glances lavished upon him, or to the pleasantries that circled round the table,

the most audacious winged with a subtle flattery for the royal attention. For the monarch himself, who dropped him ever and anon a confidential word, Lord Rockhurst had but a perfunctory, if quite courteous attention. A deep mood of abstraction had held him. But, now, his interest was vivid, unmistakable. He stared at the Vidame; and, as he stared, surprise seemed to pass into distaste, almost into pain.

The lad paused in his advance, as if held by that intent gaze. Then he tossed his black locks; a sudden fire of resentment leaped and died in his eyes, and with crimson cheeks he came swaggering round the table, and dropped on one knee before the King. Charles glanced curiously from him to his Lord Constable; Rockhurst's gaze was still resting inscrutably upon the lad.

"Odd's fish, my lord Rockhurst!" cried the King. "You look at the pretty boy as if you saw a spectre!"

"Even so, your Majesty."

The sonority of the voice, the strange words, fell impressively in that light atmosphere. Again En-guerrand's black pupils shot fury. Rockhurst, with the same absorbed air, laid his fingers on a slender chain that hung round his neck, and drew from his breast a gold locket.

Opening and holding it in his hand so that none could view it but himself, he appeared to be contrasting some portrait concealed in it with the countenance of the still kneeling boy.

“Ha!” cried the King, “take heed, ladies; for, as we live, the mystery of my lord Rockhurst’s locket is at length to be solved. A spectre, did you say, my lord?”

The Lord Constable closed the locket with a snap, slipped it back among the laces on his breast, and turned easily upon the King; his frown had vanished.

“Nay, no spectre, sire; the merest passing fantasy!”

Charles was shaken with laughter, a noiseless laugh which scarcely wrote itself upon his melancholy features.

“Methought, from your lenten face,” said he, “that you were struck by some memory of past misdeeds.”

“Your Majesty mistakes. No memory; but a warning!”

The King looked puzzled; then, with his usual distaste for prolonged discussion, made a gesture as if he would put the matter on one side.

“But that locket?” And with the words Madame

de Mantes flung out a small olive finger. Since English etiquette, it seemed, permitted every one to speak, then she would speak. The matter had become all at once of palpitating interest to her. The portrait in the locket — it was evidently a portrait — he had smiled at it. And such a smile! She took a vow that one day this man should be made to smile thus on her.

"True, true," said Charles. "Let us see into the secret at last, my merry Rockhurst."

The Lord Constable flung himself back into his chair.

"Nay, sire," said he, and the deference of the words became mockery in view of the attitude of the speaker. "Your Majesty has every jurisdiction over me — my goods, my services, my life, are irrevocably yours to dispose of; but my thoughts are mine own. And this locket belongs to my most secret thoughts."

Curiosity flickered once more for a moment in the royal eye. But through drooping lids the Lord Constable's gaze was steel-like, and the King shrugged his shoulders with the foreign gesture that cleaved to him through life.

"God's mercy, my lieges, that ye keep your thoughts to yourselves, at least!" he cried, with an

assumed rueful air; "for, between your lost goods and your past services, our exchequer has enough to meet." He stretched out his hand for the guitar as he spoke, and twanged ignorantly at the strings.

Enguerrand rose with a grin. Charles's ingratitude toward his ruined loyalists was no secret in France, and the cold gibe was after his heart.

"Then we shall not see the locket?" cried the Frenchwoman, disappointment ringing through her fluted tones.

"How the bird twitters!" cried Charles, good-naturedly. "Nay, my dear, curiosity was ever fatal to your sex. Let us remain in paradise for an hour or so. Sing!"

Jeanne de Mantes had a voice that matched her looks: small, insinuating, sweet; creeping into favour, rather than storming it; docile to a thousand modulations and graces. Now it was the very gaiety of music; anon just a hint of pathos; and every word distinct as a dropping gem. And this accompanied with here a dreamlike fixity of gaze, there an arch roll of the eyes; here again a punctuating dimple, a flash in the peachy, dark face of the whitest teeth in all the world; there a drooping of the lip that positively demanded the consolation of a kiss.

Charles had not been so stirred to enthusiasm for a considerable time. He called for a second ditty, and yet another. This last had an audacious lilt, with a refrain so infectious that the royal listener began to hum it midway and sadly out of tune. Toward the last verse, however, under strokes waxing ever smarter, a string broke with a plaintive sob.

“Ah, *diable!*” involuntarily exclaimed the singer; and his Majesty laughed delightedly. Then his face changed again as he noted the compressed lips of Lady Castlemaine and the glacial anger of Miss Stewart. He rose and broke up the circle. His arm on Rockhurst’s shoulder, he was about to retire, when he paused and hummed a few notes of the last song once more.

“A linnet,” he said, “a positive linnet! Odd’s fish! but we’d have her pipe to us when we might give her our whole attention.”

He spoke low, and flung back a look, that held a certain apprehension, toward Miss Stewart. This latter stood very erect, and bore a studied air of indifference.

“If your lordship will look to it —” he went on, then broke off petulantly under the glance that Rockhurst turned upon him. “Good lack, man! I forget how much of the Puritan there is in thee at times.”

"Your Majesty," said Rockhurst, in his most stately manner, "will find with ease an apter messenger."

"Aye," said the King, cynically. His narrow, dark eye roamed a moment about the room, then rested reflectively upon the fair mask of Enguerand's face. The boy turned quickly. Charles raised a beckoning hand.

"Vidame," said the King, "a word in the hollow of your ear!"

The two drew apart, while Rockhurst moved away to the door to await the King's pleasure. Charles rejoined him, laughing.

"Faith, if I had such subjects as my cousin Louis, I should be well served. Yes, 'tis your French finger you want for true lightness of touch. My honest Britons are all thumbs. The pretty singer's brother . . . Her own brother, no less! 'Tis a positive little Satan!"

"Aye," assented Rockhurst, briefly.

The two went down the corridor in silence; then Rockhurst spoke with some abruptness.

"Your Majesty," said he, "has before this, I think, found it add to his interest in . . . bird-catching that he should not be the only fowler in the field."

“How now?” said Charles, halting. The group of attendant pages halted likewise at the end of the gallery.

“I have thought,” said Rockhurst, steadily, “I, also, that I should like that linnet to sing to me.”

Charles frowned; but his favourite pursued unmoved:—

“As I have only my *beaux yeux*, as we used to say abroad, to stake against your Majesty’s overwhelming attractions, I should be flattered indeed, however, were you to have me banned as a marauder.”

Touched upon the string of his humour, Charles was ever easily appeased. The very impudence of his grave constable’s proposal tickled him. It was not the first time that they had found themselves opposed in rivalry, though scarcely ever before so avowedly. On the last occasion (the King remembered this pleasantly) Rockhurst, for all his *beaux yeux*, had been notoriously displaced; and this, doubtless, was a little stroke of revenge. That was Rockhurst’s way.

“Beware of boasting, my lord Constable!” he exclaimed banteringly.

They were on the threshold of the apartment. Rockhurst made a deep *congé*.

"I never boast, as your Majesty knows. But your Majesty was wont to love a fair wager."

Charles's smile widened. He nodded assent, and Rockhurst pursued after a moment's reflection:—

"Will your Majesty stake the payment of all the arrears due to my yeomen's company that the linnet's first song will not be for me? I would wager in return their immediate settlement, out of my own estate, unless your Majesty would impose on me any other stake."

"Admirable!" said the King. "Yet we would have a more immediate, a more personal, token of victory—if we succeed against your *beaux yeux*," he put in with a little mockery, "and that is, in addition to the paltry coin, a view of the contents of that locket, my merry Rockhurst."

Rockhurst hesitated, then bowed. "So be it, sire," said he.

And hereupon Charles retired, laughing, in cynical anticipation of a good stroke of business. That ever-present question of arrears of pay was a persistent annoyance to the royal conscience.

II

WHITEHALL STAIRS

“LITTLE SATAN” — bestowed from lips royal in terms of favour, the nickname cleaved congenially to Enguerrand — entered into the rôle of King’s Mercury with all the *verve* expected of him. But he was considerably surprised at the manner in which his embassy was received. To place the most unworthy motives invariably foremost was, he flattered himself, to display a thorough knowledge of woman. He had yet to learn the thousand sensibilities that distinguish even the frail of that elusive sex from the unscrupulous gallant.

As he paused on his announcement, fully expecting to descry in the new recipient of the royal favour at least as much gratification as he himself experienced in being singled out as confidential messenger, he was met by a sudden pouncing movement, expressive only of wrath, by a dark look, actually by a flush.

Had Jeanne de Mantes ever blushed? It might

be a matter of doubt. But she could colour high with displeasure; and very becoming it was.

"What, sir?" she cried. "I cannot have understood aright. Is this the Vidame de Joncelles, the French gentilhomme, the servant of Madame Henriette de France — is this my compatriot, my own brother, who comes to make me such a proposition? — It is really not to credit one's ears! . . ."

Brother and sister faced each other, strangely alike now in their anger: nostrils quivering over fierce, quick breaths, black eyes flashing into black eyes.

It was the Vidame who could scarce credit his ears. Here was he, the messenger of the King, come to open before one whose devouring ambition, he believed, if anything, exceeded his own, a perspective of boundless possibilities — and he was thus received! He sat before her in the small parlour allotted to her in Whitehall, — an exiguous rounded corner room overlooking the river, — his mouth opened in astonishment, deserted for the nonce by all his pert airs of assurance.

"Nay, Jeanne," he said at length, "keep this pretty scene for his Majesty, if you will; or rather," he amended, restored by the sound of his own glib speech, "take my advice, and hold your fits of virtue

as cured and over, once for all, for they say that King Charles becomes very easily *ennuyé*. For, with me, whom do you expect to take in?”

Whereupon, at a tangent, Madame de Mantes flew into a new rage.

“And it is this little man who is my brother!” she cried, clasping her hands and surveying Enguerrand from head to foot, with flashing fury; “*this* is the child who knelt beside me at our mother’s knee!”

She thrust out a lip of utter contempt: “Take thee in? Thou — thou little withered fruit . . . a stone inside, hard skin without; what art thou to me?”

“What am I to thee — Jeanne? To-day,” he cried, “the stepping-stone to thy fortune, if thou wilt only see it! Now listen to me.”

But even as he spoke, of a sudden his anger cooled before the expression of her face. What if she was in earnest, what of his fortunes then? It was no time to quarrel. He caught his sister round the waist and advanced his lips toward the smooth cheek. But a masterly slap met the endearment.

“I’ll be no stepping-stone to you, nor creature of the English King,” Jeanne announced, half laughing, half crying. “There’s better in London, Master Enguerrand.”

He looked at her with wicked eyes, his face whiter than usual against the three scarlet stripes.

"You've had a visit this morning before me!" he cried suddenly; then, with a diabolic flash of intuition, he recalled the long, soft looks she had cast upon Lord Rockhurst.

"A visit?" said the Frenchwoman, swinging herself upon her heel. "Why, yes, that might well be." She had a private smile, as to the memory of something singularly pleasant.

"I warrant me that it is your purpose to visit before long that interesting pile they call the Tower of London. Have a care, *ma sœur*," and his trembling lips could scarce articulate the sneer,—had he not hated that man at very first sight,—"it is there, they say, that heads are lost in England!"

"Out of my room!" she ordered.

He laughed in what was almost a convulsion of rage. To what post, to what favours, might he not have aspired, with such a beginning! Meanwhile it is always the messenger of unwelcome news who bears the blame. *Malédiction!* His hand on the door-latch, he sent his last shaft with deadly purport to wound:—

"O Jeanne, and I had never thought thee the woman to submit to a rival! Call to mind, *ma*

toute belle, milord's smile as he gazed at the face in the locket."

Madame de Mantes heard the furious laughter echo down the passage as the door closed. She stood in the middle of her little room nibbling at her finger. 'Twas true! He had smiled at the locket, and with what tenderness! Ah, that was very different from the mocking twist of the lips with which he had wittily courted her only an hour ago. How! a king was to be sacrificed to him, and the man dared to haggle over the full surrender of his heart! 'Twould be monstrous!

"Ah, there's my Little Satan," said the King. But his long, gloomy face relaxed into no mirth: he had had a tedious morning, and of all things Charles could least endure tedium. The lady who had been first in favour so long that her chain had become well-nigh as heavy as that of matrimony itself, had made him such a scene as his own good and faithful queen would never have permitted herself to make. And another lady, whom for some time the volatile royal fancy had pursued in vain, had shown herself more hopelessly obdurate than usual. Between chiding Palmer and elusive Stewart, Charles was as near ill-humour as his easy temper

would allow — and he was therefore, characteristically, ready for any diversion to this unwonted hue of his sky. The sight of the little Vidame's pallid, handsome face at the end of the audience room put him in mind at once of the whim he had indulged in overnight for the lady of the guitar; a linnet that trilled, a little quail for roundness and compactness.

For an *entremet*, according to the new-fangled French jargon of banqueting, Madame de Mantes was certainly not a dish to be despised; and, to add spice to it, there was that presumptuous fellow's wager. Actually a wager! — Those arrears of pay had been forced upon the royal memory altogether too often of late. So, with a gesture, Charles waved his usual circle aside; and those that formed it saw, with astonishment and the virulent spite of the courtier, the King withdraw with the unknown French boy into the embrasure of the windows overlooking the Thames.

Some bethought themselves that his Majesty had noticed the creature already on the previous night; and whispers began to circulate.

One inventive personage declared he knew (upon positive authority) that the little Vidame had come on an important secret mission of the French King

anent the necessity of Romanising the English Church without delay. "Vidame, mark you, is an old French ecclesiastical title," he was good enough to explain. "He holds his lands in feu from some mighty Archbishopric — formerly a Vidame was a kind of ecclesiastical marshal — does not this furnish food for reflection, my lords? But —" "Pooh," cried an airy gallant (who had a French tilt to his moustache), "our good Dorset has ever Rome in his head. Why, man, a Vidame and his Bishop, it is well known, always hate each other cordially as ever fox and wolf; 'tis always between them, who shall have the fattest share of church booty! Nay, then, are you so simple? Have you looked at that smooth cheek, those rich curls? Why, 'tis the most piquant matter — some Fair Audacity in disguise! No more Vidame than your lordship's self; but, believe me, some cosy little chanoinesse, sheltering her gentle lapses under the comfortable wing of Mother Church." — "Hearken to Follett and his follies!" interposed a third, a frank-faced youth, the sap of whose English generous common-sense had not yet been withered by courtly poisons. "Nay, neither envoy nor canoness, my lords, but as tough a youth as ever I came across. I tried a fall with him, in the Cockpit, — having

heard him brag of a trick of Breton wrestling,—and by my soul, the lad is steel and bow-string; he had me on my back in a twinkling and jeered at me till, for a moment, I saw him in red! But I like the lad; he has mettle, for all his whey face. Heard you not what his Majesty calls him: his Little Satan!—Old Rowley hath some bit of devil's work for him this morning. And that's the nut of the mystery."

"Well, Vidame," said the King, as soon as they were out of earshot, "let us now arrange the hour when we are again to hear your melodious sister warble, as though she were a bird and found our dull skies as bright as those of France."

Enguerrand's lips trembled. His pale cheek grew paler still.

But he had by no means been prepared to reveal his diplomatic failure. His plan was to temporise, in the hope of eventual success. But his sensitive acuteness nosed a trail of bitter temper under all Charles's urbanity; and, flustered, he hesitated a second. The King drew his great eyebrows together.

"Madame requires pressing, it seems. She is perhaps hoarse to-day."

Enguerrand foresaw how, in another moment, by

a gesture of that languid white hand, the insignificant personality of Jeanne—and with it his own equally futile existence—would be swept from Charles's horizon. Biting his lips, he cast about, but vainly, in his own brain, for a word which would keep the King's fickle humour at least a little longer on the same bent.

Could she but be brought to take her golden chance, Jeanne would hold her own against any adversary but relentless Time—Enguerrand knew his sister well enough to feel certain of that. So promising an opportunity, and to see it wrecked by a mood of monstrous folly!

His eye wandered desperately from the King's face, whereon was writ coming dismissal, to the dull prospect which lay beyond the window: a leaden river under a leaden sky—merely to see the huddled, cloaked wayfarers in the boats gliding past made one shiver.

Suddenly the boy's eyes narrowed; he drew close to the window, peered eagerly down; nay, he was not mistaken! Yonder, indeed, went Jeanne . . . Jeanne and her woman, and at the water stairs a boat lay in wait for them. In a flash he understood; he had been right in his surmise! Moved by an inspiration born of the very genius for intrigue, he

cried eagerly, but under his breath, arresting the King's attention even as he was moving wearily away:—

“Nay, your Majesty, my sister is not hoarse, at least to my knowledge—I found her not in her apartment, and now I perceive the reason. The lady is not hoarse . . . yet seems like to become so presently! How will her sweet notes sound, I wonder, after her water journey, this bitter day!”

“Odd's fish!” said the King. “What prate is this, sir?”

Yet, curiosity drew him to approach the window in his turn. Through the Whitehall water gate, down the King's own stairs, a figure, wrapped in a rose and grey mantle daintily held up to show little close tripping feet, a small dame was picking her way down the miry steps. Behind her a waiting woman in russet carried what appeared to be a lute case. Charles turned a look, half quizzical, half interrogative, upon the Vidame.

“And is indeed that pink-and-grey bird our fair singer of last evening?”

“Even so, sire,” said Enguerrand, bowing low to conceal the agitation of his countenance.

“Satan, my little friend,” said the King, more genially, “can you inform me whither she may be

winging her flight, from the very stairs sacred to our own passage? Not that such ordinance can be enforced upon birds."

"I notice, your Majesty," said Enguerrand, now turning candid eyes full upon the King, "the skiff is heading down river. I believe your Majesty's Tower lies somewhere in that direction."

"Ha!" said the King. His deep eye lightened for a second ominously. But as rapidly as it came, anger vanished from his countenance; and with it the last traces of his moody, weary humour. "Odd's fish!" he ejaculated, "I had forgot! To the Tower, say you, Vidame? Nay, then, that minds me my Lord Constable and myself had a merry wager touching a singing-bird. *Ma foi*, he is early with the decoy and the lime twig!"

He paused. The Vidame looked at him in astonishment — a king to wager with a subject! A king — and to let himself be crossed in his pleasure and to find in the circumstance food for indulgent laughter. And the man lodged so conveniently in his Tower! Joncelle's vindictive young soul had been all afire to see the Lord Constable consigned to one of his own cells. If the Tower of London was not Charles's Bastille, for the disposal of inconvenient courtiers, where was the use of it? If a

king made no use of his prerogatives, where was the use of royalty? — The Vidame had yet much to learn.

Pulling his full underlip between finger and thumb, Charles stared alternately out of the window at the picture of grey river, vanishing skiff, and brooding sky, and at Enguerrand's delicate white face. Beneath the boy's tensely still attitude it was easy to divine quiver of nerves, fierce eagerness.

"Why, now," said the King at last, somewhat maliciously, "we are not too proud to be taught by our subject. Our Lord Constable and ourself had, as I said, a wager who should capture the linnet's next song. My Lord Rockhurst is an old soldier: he trusts no one. We sent a messenger: we therefore stand to lose."

The colour rushed to the Vidame's face. He dropped his lids to hide the tears of mortification that sprang to his eyes. Had the fate of some battle, the issue of some diplomatic mission, been at stake, he might almost have felt less keenly the reproach of his failure. To be King's Mercury, to set off so gaily, on so high a flight, and fall so quickly, so hopelessly — no situation could have been more exquisitely painful to the Vidame de Joncelles. (Poor, pious mother! could she have read, that

moment, into the soul of her son, she might well have thought that the house she had so carefully kept swept and garnished was indeed invaded by the seven devils.)

The King's glance, however, was not unkind. "Nay, now," he continued, in ever more good-natured tones, "all is not lost yet. This infamous Rockhurst of ours laid too tempting a stake that I should let him carry off the prize without an effort. What say you, Little Satan? Have you a mind to see the Tower? Your great father has been pretty busy there these five hundred years. It should be of interest to his little son."

He flung out his long, careless hand, as he spoke, toward the boy, and Enguerrand, dropping on one knee, kissed it with sudden passion. Something about that hitherto dormant part of his young anatomy, his heart, was stirred. He had felt himself dominated by that very carelessness and good nature against which but a little while ago he had inwardly railed; caught a hint of a truer royalty in this careless King than in all the pompous tyranny of his cousin of France.

Whether the inexplicable Stuart charm, which Charles, black-visaged, saturnine, cynical as he was, possessed no less than his romantically beautiful

father and his handsome, winning brother of York, had seized the more potently upon Enguerrand's nature that had hitherto been brazened in self-conceit and self-interest against all external influence, the fact was that in that touch of his lips, the Vidame de Joncelles devoted himself to a master.

Charles stepped back into the room, called up his gentleman-in-waiting, and gave instant order for his barge. As he turned pleasantly then to receive the *congées* of the dismissed audience, a fine-looking young man strode quickly into the room, made his way up, and bowing so low that his profuse, fair ringlets fell in a cascade on either side of his check, presented a letter for the royal hand. Enguerrand, standing close, heard the messenger's murmured words.

"From Miss Stewart, your Grace."

The whole circle stepped back and grew wide while the King read. And many a look of envy was cast upon the newcomer as Charles, thrusting the sheet into his breast, turned a complacent countenance upon him.

"Vastly well, Sir Paul," said Charles, with a little nod.

The young man visibly swelled with triumph. The Vidame's busy brain worked at high speed:

Miss Stewart? That was the great fair girl who gave the King such cold return for his notice last night. . . . Rumour about Court had it, as Enguerrand knew, that she was playing a high game. . . .

As a man might look upon one who threatened to rob him of a mistress's smile, so Enguerrand glared at the messenger who had evidently succeeded in his task. But his own hour was not yet over. In high good humour, Charles beckoned him again to his side.

"Come," said he, "or we shall be too late. Tide waits not for kings; and linnets will sing only when the mood takes them."

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Enguerrand, seated in the royal barge, felt his heart swell with pride. He was alone in attendance, save for the tall officer of guards, whose face, impassive and dark as bronze over the folds of the red horse cloak, looked forth with the indifference of the man under orders, upon this last whim of the master. The French boy's blood was tingling with excitement. The raw airs, the bleak aspect of the waterway, the shadow of the towering masonry from which they were just emerging, dark with its story of royal tragedy, failed to depress a spirit otherwise susceptible to physical impressions.

His failure, after all, had become more profitable than success. He was on sudden terms of intimacy with a monarch whom he was eager to serve; and in conjunction with the Stuart himself, he was about to inflict at least discomfiture upon the man for whom at first sight he had conceived hatred.

He was still child enough, moreover, to feel a titillating sense of gratification in watching the skill and vigour of the royal watermen, the like of which was undreamed of on French rivers; in feeling that it was partly for him these stalwart backs bowed in rhythmic measure, that the oars swept the waters, green now to his closer vision; that it was, in a way, before his own passage that the craft hastily opened out to leave a wide channel, and that every head was uncovered.

Charles's face had fallen into its habitual expression in repose, of somewhat bitter melancholy; and the journey was traversed in silence, until, just in front of the archway of London Bridge, the sweep of the tide, which had been for some time at the full, began to tell decidedly against them. The barge came almost to a standstill.

The King roused himself from his abstraction and flung a rueful smile over his shoulder at Enguerrand: "Said I not well? The tide waits not for kings."

The watermen caught the phrase, and as if stung in their pride of office fell to at the oars with a fury which sent the sweat rolling down each weather-beaten cheek.

"Our wily friend," proceeded Charles, "chose his hour with judgment. The bird has as easy a flight as the dove to the ark. We stand to be beaten, after all, by my Lord Constable."

Beaten! Never, if his oarsmen died for it. The brawny arms shot out in unison; the backs bent and straightened with the rage of defiance; they shot the bridge in triumph, the contentious waters vainly swirling and lapping against the sides of the barge.

As they emerged into the gentler stream beyond, there was a moment's pause, and every man of the crew, dashing the salt sweat from his eyes, turned involuntarily toward the royal visage. The slight smile of approbation on Charles's lips seemed ample guerdon for the feat; indeed, as in the case of most saturnine countenances, its momentary relaxation had a rare charm. They fell upon the oars again, and presently the mighty pile of the Tower seemed to engulf them into its dark shades.

If Whitehall, stained with the blood of a king, shed a gloom about it, even while holding the most

irresponsible court in the world, what sinister shroud enveloped these walls to every imaginative mind. The stones of the dungeon, tradition said, had been first cemented in lime and blood ; and enough blood had since been poured out within those gates to stain the moats forever crimson.

The water gates swung back, and the King's barge glided in. Charles's face bore an air of pleasant anticipation, unwonted good fortune. He was certain to be amused, whichever way events turned ; certain at least of some novel sensation.

III

THE LINNET'S SONG

JEANNE DE MANTES sat sidewise in the deep window-seat of the parlour in the constable's Tower, her dark eyes roaming about her with a curiosity not unmixed with a kind of awe. The room, dark with ancient oak to its blackened ceiling, with its huge depth of wall, its aspect of strength, silence, antiquity, resembled no apartment that she had ever entered. True, she had never penetrated into the Bastille, and true, she was here of her own free will and free to leave at her caprice; yet a small shiver crept over her. There seemed to her something ominous, something fated, about the place. All said and done, it was a prison. What should bring hither those who lived for freedom and joy?

She glanced almost timidly at the man who stood, one elbow propped on the embrasure, gazing down at her with inscrutable yet perhaps mocking eyes. He matched his Tower, she thought, in the something dark and melancholy which, though he might smile

and court, yet remained as undisturbed as the sombreness of the room by the leaping firelight or the early spring flowers on the table.

Their glances met. In the light that fell upon her from grey skies and grey wall, the texture of her face showed flawless; richly coloured, at once soft and firm, it glowed like some southern fruit out of the cold setting. Her lips were parted: forgotten, in the momentary feeling of strangeness, all the modish airs and graces of the Louvre. She looked like a child, Rockhurst thought. He smiled at her, suddenly, kindly; sat down on the window-seat beside her and took her little amber-tinted hand in his.

"This is a rude place for such a one as you," he said; "and you look about you like some creature caught against its will. Nay, you shall but sing me a song, and take your flight again forthwith, if you so wish it."

All the woman in her awoke, petulant, displeased. Chivalry in love, a man who could desire and yet spare — that was not at all to her French taste. She drew her hands quickly from his and tossed her head.

"How so," she cried in her pretty foreign English. "Fortwit' after my song? But now, at once, if you prefer! Your lordship is quick tired!"

She sprang from the seat as she spoke. But he, stretching a lazy arm, caught her by her yielding waist.

"I said, if you wish it, Mignonne. In love I am no highwayman, but a courteous dealer."

She feigned to struggle, brushing his cheek with her curls; then gave him all the candour of her eyes and the glint of a smile from her wicked lips; upon which, suddenly, he kissed them.

"Ah! highwayman, after all!" she mocked.

He drew her close to him, laughing silently.

"Milord Constable," said she, "if one of your soldiers down there should chance to look up, it is all over with . . . your reputation."

Again he laughed, struck by the audacious humour of the soft creature within the circle of his arm.

"Madame," said he, then, with unexpected gravity, "my soldiers have long ceased to look up. My reputation is too well established to be worth looking to."

Piqued, she thrust him from her with a quick gesture. It is one thing to be quickly conquered; it is another to be classed among the easy conquests.

"You're insolent, milord!" she said, with out-thrust lip.

"My pretty one," he answered her, "anger be-

comes you vastly; but as for myself, I have a preference for the dimpled smile."

He let his arm drop from her carelessly. She stood looking down at him, fascinated, taunted, uncertain.

"Believe me," he went on in the same tone, half condescending, half caressing, "I am much older than you; I have had experience — life becomes much pleasanter, its few good hours vastly easier of discovery, if we agree to take certain things for granted. And, as example is ever better than preaching, let us put my theory in practice. I, now, take it for granted," as he spoke his fine teeth flashed a second in a wider smile, "that you are all virtue, yet that you harbour for my unworthy self an amiable passion which excuses, nay, commands, a gentle lapse. You on your side take it for granted that I am consumed with an ardour unknown hitherto in my existence. Come, does not that place us instantly on a delightful footing? And this being so: why, then, come back to my side."

She palpitated between fury and the extraordinary attraction which drew her to him. Her breast heaved, her eye first lightened, then melted. She took an unwilling step, then paused. Almost a sob rose in her throat. In another moment she would have

flung herself on his breast, as he sat awaiting her with that air of amused certainty that was in itself at once part of his fascination for her and an insult to her every instinct of pride, when suddenly she perceived that his eye had become fixed and distant. The insolent wretch had already dropped her from his thoughts; she was not worth to him even that pause of expectation!

Staring through the south window, up the river toward that gloomy bridge through the arches of which she had come to him, his attention was absorbed, his glance had gained a hawklike keenness; the lines of his face were set. Whatever he beheld without, it was something that evoked far keener interest in him than the woman who had come to his call, in preference to that of a king. This was too much!

"Adieu, milord," she cried in a high, strained voice. But, womanlike, she must see what it was, without there, on that hideous river, that he was looking at.

The royal barge, with its standard and pennants, its flash of scarlet and the long swing of red-and-gold oars, was already masked under the shadow of the battlements; nothing but the long stretch of water, dotted with black craft, met the searching of her angry eyes.

What is it, she asked herself; his fair one, in some well-known boat? Ah! the owner perhaps of that face in the locket, which even his King was not to see? What in the name of all decent pride was Jeanne de Mantes doing here? Yet even as she moved again to leave him, with what dignity she might, the incomprehensible being turned to her again — turned with a smile so winning, a glance so warm and caressing, a voice so tender, that the young woman lost her footing on her momentary plane of dignity, and found herself floundering again between a tearful desire for surrender and that hot anger which only a real love is able to kindle.

“How now! Adieu, say you? From your lips, sweet, that is a word I hope never to hear.”

“Why should I remain, milord?” she said feebly. “You care not to keep me.”

“I care so much that I will not let you go.” He came after her quickly into the room. “Why, you foolish child, how can you escape from the Tower so long as its constable means to hold you? Do you not know, I have but to call a word, and the draw-bridge is raised, the portcullis dropped over the waterway — that I have the right of imprisonment here, that there are secret places where I can hide

my wilful prisoners? Nay, sweet one, are we not well together here? — You shall sing to me!"

Stirred with an emotion which, hitherto only playing with life, she had never known before, she murmured, blushing and trembling:—

"Sing! *Eh, mon Dieu*, you hold to it, then?"

"Why," he answered her, "was it not singing that you caught my heart?"

Delicately flattered, she suffered herself to be led to a cushioned seat by the deep hearth; and she was already stretching out her arms to receive the guitar, when something in his air struck her quick apprehension, something at once of eagerness for her compliance, yet of indifference toward herself. He shot restless glances toward the window, seemed to strain his ear as if for some expected signal. When his eye swept over her, it was with an impatience other than that of the fond lover. She took the instrument from his hand, and watched him with a new, critical closeness as he flung himself upon the settle opposite to her.

In a tone which ill concealed irritability, he cried to her:—

"Begin — begin, little bird!"

Here was some odd mystery. She folded her hands across the polished olive-wood.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed, and it was her turn now to mock. "What a passion for music has your lordship!"

His eye shot anger upon her, beneath contracted brow. She felt at last that she had power, and her smile widened.

"You and your song," said he, "are inseparable. By your graciousness I hold you mine for a little while, nor will I be defrauded of any of the sweetness you can give."

The words seemed charmingly chosen; but again the underlying, unknown purpose was perceptible. A quick inspiration came to her: here was the moment to bargain; and Enguerrand, the little impertinent one, should know of her easy triumph before this grey English day had turned to the murky English night.

"If I sing," she said, "I must have my guerdon."

Amusement and relief sprang together into his look:—

"Nay, then, pretty one; make your own terms. Pearls for those shell-like ears—gems for that throat—"

She shook her head till the ringlets danced.

"Speak, then," he went on impatiently. "What jewel, what bauble?"

She bent forward with a new, adorable softness, coaxing.

"A mere trifle, indeed, milord. I but ask for that locket of yours with which you were pleased to excite the curiosity of Whitehall last night."

"How now!" said Rockhurst. He started, and turned the lightning of his glance, the thunder-cloud of his brow, upon her, a man whom it was not good to offend, and she quailed an instant. Then her hot blood rose in jealous passion:—

"So vastly precious? Why, then, generous milord Constable, suppose I put a high price upon my song; are you so ungallant?"

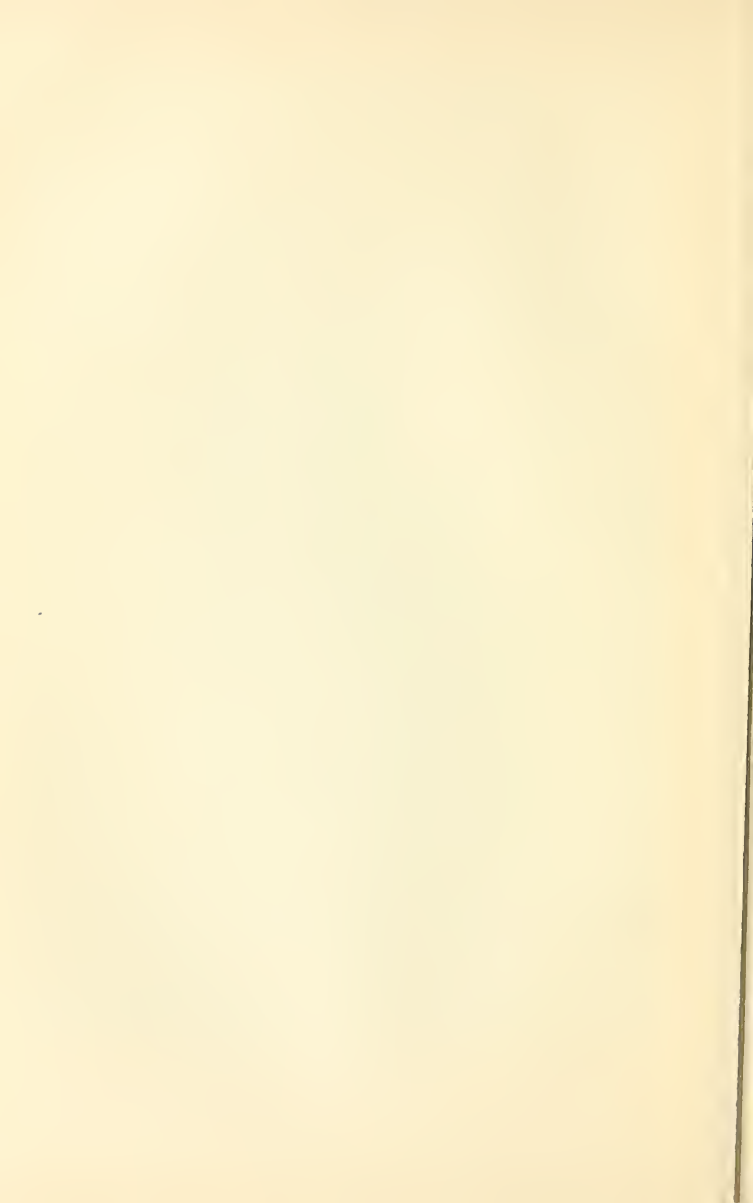
"Little madame," retorted he, drily, "since you set a price on your favour, you would be as vastly disappointed with this poor trinket as Eve with the taste of her apple. Continue to desire it," he went on, falling back into his tone of light cynicism. "To long for anything unattainable is one of the spices of existence."

The firelight leaped on her angry face. She sprang to her feet, dashing aside the guitar, which fell on the stone floor with sonorous wail.

"If I could flatter myself I was helping to provide milord's tedium with such a spice," she cried, "my immediate departure would have a double charm!"



She felt at last that she had power.



She reached a trembling hand toward her cloak. He, outstretched on the settle, watched her, without moving. At this moment, grave sounds, a trumpet call, followed by dull roll of kettledrum, rose from without into the momentary silence of the room. Stone wall and vault gave back the echo. There was a hurried tramp of feet, sharp cries of command. The Frenchwoman's hand was arrested in mid-air. She looked in startled query at her host, who was slowly gathering his long limbs together preparatory to rising. He met her glance with one that struck her excited fancy as sinister, and she gave a cry like a child : —

“Let me out of this horrible place ! You have no right to keep me here !”

He caught her wrist with a grasp gentle yet relentless.

“Your password, Jeanne, shall be a song — however short, but one stave, a few notes ! Your song I must have !”

He picked up the guitar, and again pressed it upon her. She put her hand to her throat with a sob, flung a piteous glance around her like a trapped thing, and struck a faltering chord. Then, in a sudden revulsion, her courage rose again.

“Pah !” she cried, “’tis out of tune ! *Eh, bien*

non! I will not sing! I am French; you have no right to hold me here!"

"By the Lord!" said Rockhurst, a gleam of genuine admiration leaping to his eye, "but I like your spirit! Be dumb, then, sweetheart. You shall pay me by and by. Nay," he added, smiling on her bewilderment, "let thy mantle lie where it is; for, prithee, I would have thee assist me to receive his Majesty."

"His Majesty?" she cried, in fresh amazement.

"Aye," he laughed. "Didst not hear the royal tucket sound without? Charles in person, who always finds the world but a dull place, even under the same roof with an old friend, if there be not the flutter of a petticoat to liven it. But you have made me dally, little Madame Mischief, and even my indulgent monarch expects some pretence of ceremony."

His hand was on the bolt of the latchet as he spoke; his last words were almost lost in the echoes of the vaulted passage.

Charles paused on the threshold, his sallow face seeming darker than usual in the grim light. His lips smiled, but there was a certain displeasure in his eye as it roamed from Jeanne's crimsoning coun-

tenance to the guitar on the seat. From the gloom of the passage Enguerrand's white face shone out, composed save for the deep reproach of his glance when it met that of his sister. Rockhurst alone, bowing the King into his apartment, wore a pleasant air of unconcern.

"We verily believe our visit is inopportune," said Charles, with sarcastic courtesy. "We have interrupted, we fear, some dulcet music, my Lord Constable?"

Rockhurst closed the heavy door behind his guests, then advanced to the King's side.

"Nay, sire," said he, with fine geniality, "the bird came to the lure, it is true, but no art of mine or persuasion could call forth a song. . . . Your Majesty, no doubt, will prove more successful."

"Odd's fish!" cried Charles, with one of his rare, hearty laughs. "Say you so, indeed, invincible Constable? Say you so, indeed, my merry Rockhurst? Beaten? And under such auspices — alone with your fair! But how, then, are we to put our own skill now to the test, before so many witnesses? For we would not win our wager on the royal authority, but in all equality, my good Lord Constable, even as in that merry moment we entered upon it."

Wager? Here, then, was the word of the riddle!

A wager between two irresponsible men of pleasure: who should first obtain of a woman the petty guerdon of a song! 'Twas for that she had been wooed by both — both! And she, who had been uplifted on a wave of magnanimous feeling, who had flattered herself to be giving up a king for the love of a subject! Jeanne de Mantes had grown white to the lips. She caught at the table behind her for support, yet never had her wits been clearer. To sing for neither would serve them both well. Aye, but to sing for Charles would best punish him who had deepest offended. She flung one look of fury at Rockhurst, and then turned to the King, who had let himself sink upon the settle in front of the fire:—

“May the poor object of your Majesty’s wager inquire what are the stakes that were set upon her favour?” she asked, with a deadly sweetness, taking up the guitar and beginning to tune it with little, fierce hands.

Charles, who saw himself on the point of success, answered thoughtlessly, with a schoolboy look of triumph at the constable:—

“I but bargained for a sight of the contents of that mysterious locket which was so contumaciously denied to my curiosity last night, and —” Then he hesitated, with a faint flush of confusion.

"His Majesty," said Rockhurst, gravely, "with his usual magnanimity, opposed a large guerdon to my trifling stake."

The King, both spared and taunted by this reminder, moved uneasily on his seat. But already the twang of the guitar in harmonious cadence brought his light humour back to amusement again. If hesitation had still lurked in Jeanne's mind, the first mention of the locket had swept it away. Her voice rose, robbed perhaps of some of its delicate sweetness, but vibrating with unwonted fire and incisiveness. She chose a bellicose ditty, which a Frondeuse mother had sung to her baby ears. And when she paused, panting, on the last refrain, with a furious sweep across the strings, Charles broke into delighted applause. Enguerrand, flushing with triumph, caught the guitar from his sister's hand, as with a hysterical gesture she was about to cast it on the floor.

"I have sung!" she cried loudly, with almost a viperine movement, rising from the seat on which she had crouched to play. "Milord Rockhurst has lost his wager. Let him now pay!"

Rockhurst bowed urbanely toward her, drew the locket from its hiding-place, and with a second profound obeisance, handed it, open, to the King.

As he looked, the mischievous curiosity on Charles's face changed to an expression of profound astonishment.

"Odd's fish!" he cried.

He shot a lightning glance at Enguerrand, then at his Lord Constable, and then at the picture again. And once more his expressive countenance altered.

"Yours?" he queried.

"Yes, your Majesty," said Rockhurst.

Charles's eye remained pensive for a further span. But suddenly it wandered to the Frenchwoman, and the mercurial King burst into laughter.

"Odd's my life, but look at your sweetheart, my lord! The wench is on the very coals of jealousy — a live trout in the frying-pan were in comfort compared to her. Nay, we'll have no torture in our presence. Fain would you look at your rival, madame?"

Rockhurst made no effort to interfere, and with trembling fingers Jeanne took the trinket from the King's hand. In her turn she gave a cry; and Charles laughed heartily at the amazement, relief, and disappointment of her air.

"Why, 'tis naught but a boy!"

"Naught but a boy, indeed," echoed Charles, "yet, we'll go warrant what our Lord Constable

holds dearest upon earth. A likely lad! Aye, and with a strange resemblance to Little Satan there."

"God forbid!" ejaculated Rockhurst.

And "God forbid!" echoed Enguerrand, pertly, sharp as lightning.

Charles, who had been in high good humour, flung the lad a cold look, under which he fell back abashed and crimsoning — only to glance up again with a spasm of anger and hatred at the Lord Constable, as soon as the sovereign's head was averted.

"We knew you had an heir," said the King; then, turning with dignity to his host, "but, my lord Rockhurst, you have let us forget it. How is it? He should be at our Court."

Bowing deeply, Rockhurst answered in a low voice:—

"My son is brought up in the country, sire."

"Nay, fie!" said Charles. "Is not that even what we would reproach you with? So fair a stripling should never grow a mere rustic. We'll have him about us," insisted the King.

Again there was that moment's silence. Jeanne looked up from the picture at which she had been absently gazing. This son of Rockhurst interested her not at all; not had he been twice as handsome

as the fair, spirited face, with its odd resemblance of features and its odder dissimilitude of expression to her own brother. She felt humiliated to have played so foolish a part of jealousy, and more than ever baffled by the strange personality of the man she had elected to love.

Rockhurst took back the locket, gazed at it again, closed it, and replaced it on its chain.

"Will your Majesty forgive me," said he, at length, "nor deem me ungrateful if, in spite of your condescension, I yet hold that my son is best in the country?"

"We would at least hear your reason," said Charles, with some weariness.

"In the country, your Majesty," replied Rockhurst, then, "my lad will continue to revere his father, to honour womanhood, to live wholesomely . . . and think purely."

Charles's swarthy cheek became suddenly impurpled under a pulse of anger.

"And at our Court can your paragon practise none of these virtues?"

Rockhurst turned his glance deliberately upon the Vidame de Joncelles, who stood behind the King, his handsome chin uptilted, his eyes insolently ready to return the constable's gaze; then he swept a

look upon Jeanne de Mantes. That look said more eloquently than words the thought that was in the father's brain. Then, at last, he spoke:—

“Let me remind your Majesty of a phrase you made use of last night — ‘And he, her brother, the Little Satan!’”

The corners of Charles's lips twitched humorously at the recollection; his transient anger evaporated. It was the misfortune of his life that he was always most prone to see the light side of the most serious questions.

Enguerrand, with his implike quickness, caught the relaxation of the royal profile, and his own lips quivered with mirth. Upon Rockhurst's face came an expression of disdain mingled with deep melancholy.

“Your Majesty smiles,” said he, “and so does the lad yonder. Ah, your Majesty, look at him! 'Tis a fine lad, even as my own. And you are right! there is some resemblance, a great resemblance, between them; and your Majesty, who saw me start at it last night, deemed I had seen a spectre. I saw this, sire — what a court makes of youth.”

Charles's foot had been tapping restlessly. He moved once or twice uneasily in his chair: his merry

Rockhurst had not used him to such wearisome moods. Yet he loved the man.

"Nay, nay," he explained at length; "I'd have you remember, my lord, that it is my cousin of France who is responsible for our Little Satan yonder. Nay, Rockhurst," he went on, in his easy kindness and his sense of royal prerogative, unable to grasp the fact that any one could be in earnest in refusing the favour of his personal interest; "I'll have the lad with my own sons. We'd keep our eye upon him, man."

Rockhurst's glance rested on the King's countenance now with an unwonted tenderness.

"Alas, my beloved liege! . . ." he said gently.

Their gaze commingled; then the amazed displeasure in Charles's eyes gave place to unwilling amusement, as Rockhurst went on once more in his usual indifferent tone:—

"The poor child would at least, your Majesty will admit, find it hard to practise at Court the fourth commandment. . . . How should he honour his father? And yet 'tis my wish that his days should be long in the land."

"Why, then," said the King, shortly, "there is no more to be said."

He rose and looked a second keenly at Jeanne.

Then, upon one of those generous impulses which none could carry more gracefully into effect than himself:—

“You lost your wager to me, my lord, with all the gallantry I expected of so good a cavalier. But, Odd’s fish! I do not carry away altogether a clear conscience on the subject. If you have lost in the letter, it strikes me you have won in the spirit. I will take it, if you please, that we have both won; I will indite forthwith an order on the exchequer for those greedy yeomen of yours who contrive to be always under arrears of pay. . . . Though, upon my life, Rockhurst, you and your fellows put me in mind of those callow birds we used to watch, in our wandering days: it boots little how big the last mouthful — ever a squawk for more!”

Rockhurst folded his lips upon the obvious retort. He took the sheet from the King’s hand with an air of profound obligation:—

“Your Majesty’s veterans will be deeply gratified.”

But already Charles was weary of the subject, weary of his present company.

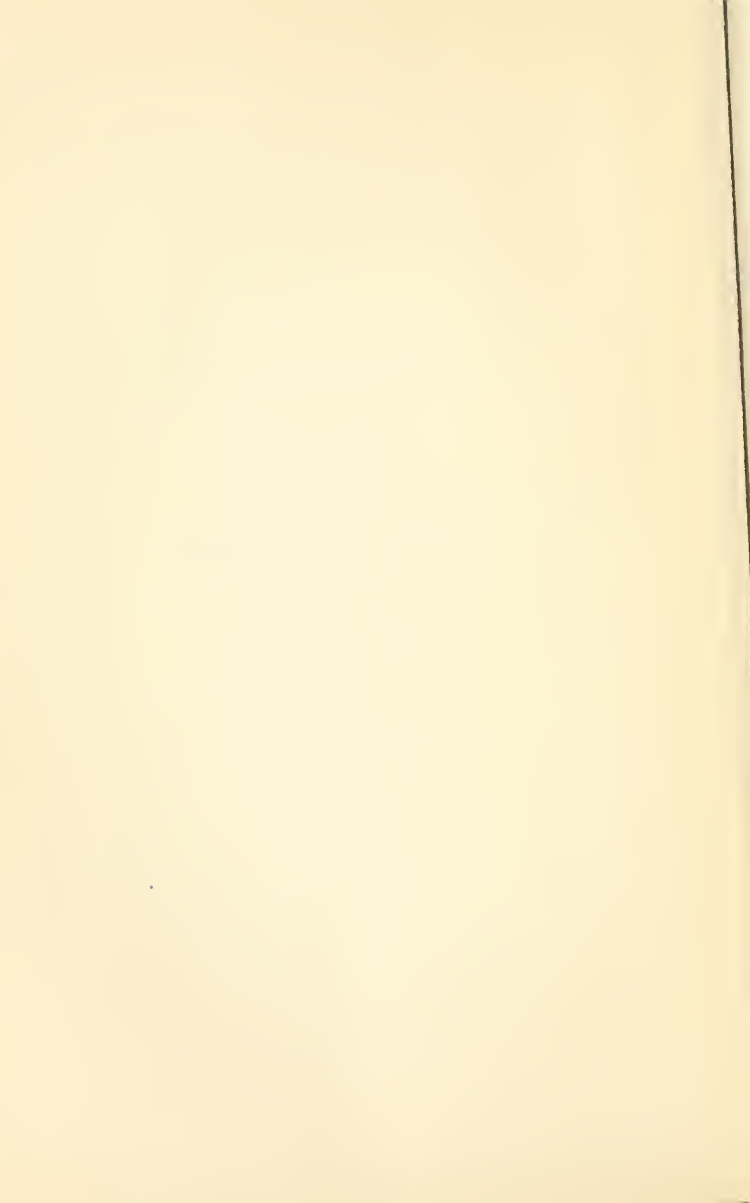
“Madame,” he said, bowing toward Jeanne as he hastily got up, “we shall importune you no longer with our presence.”

The little Frenchwoman understood very well that

in these words all royal pretensions to her favour were finally abandoned, and, in her infatuation for Rockhurst, cared as little for the fact as for the furious look cast upon her afresh by Enguerrand.

"Come, Vidame," said the King. Then he added, with a malicious gesture that pointed from Jeanne to Rockhurst, "Come, you are as much out of place in this atmosphere of virtue as ourself!"

THE PEACOCK WALK



THE PEACOCK WALK

I

JUNE ROSES

THE peacock, picking his stilted way along the lower terrace walk, conscious of his magnificence with the sunshine on his burnished breast, rejoiced at the sound of approaching steps: here, at last, was some one to see and to admire.

But in vain did Juno's bird spread and parade, advance and retreat, and display for the newcomers the glories of his outspread tail, which defied the sun with its fifty iridescent eyes. The elder of the two young men interrupted but for a second an emphatic speech to cast an indifferent glance upon the strutting splendour; while the younger poked at it idly with the stock of his whip. Offended, and with discordant protest, the peacock flapped on to the stone lion that heraldically guarded the terrace stairs and swept over their heads the fall of his unappreciated train.

Lionel Ratcliffe, the emphatic speaker, turned to survey with sullen eyes the scene which spread away beneath the balustrade of the Peacock Walk. It was the ripest hour of an early June day. The wood-crowned slopes, dropping down from the garden, were bathed in mellow light. Farther away, rich pastures, gently swelling into knolls, melted into purple haze, until they were gathered into the distant amethystine moors. Almost as far as the eye could reach, the land and all that stood on it — timber, meadow, homestead, hamlet — belonged to Rockhurst, fit appanage to those massy castle walls that rose clear-cut against the blue air, in all the majesty of ancient power. And as he gazed, Lionel Ratcliffe's heart grew sombre even as his glance. A keen-faced man, old-looking for his thirty years, somewhat below the middle height, with marked features, cold blue eyes and thin lips that betrayed the working of an intellect as sharp as the steel that hung by his side.

His companion was of vastly different stamp. Country bumpkin was written on the face of Edward Hare, on every seam of his oversmart suit; country wits stared from his prominent eye, were heralded by the laugh ever ready upon his mouth — a mouth, one dared swear, that had known no better taste in

life than the rim of an ale can, the hard cheek of some bouncing Dorcas.

Waking from his abstraction, Ratcliffe wheeled upon his cousin, and resumed his indictment:—

“It is even as I tell you,” quoth he. “They are both as apt as tinder: it needs but a spark now to set the glow. ’Slife, Ned, I little thought thine would be the hand to strike flint!”

“Mine, Cousin Lionel?” broke in the other, whining. “Nay, nay —”

But the first, flinging out an accusing forefinger, bore down the plaintive interruption:—

“Then why didst bring her over here to-day? — Come now, ’tis plain enough. Dost favour my suit, or young Rockhurst’s?”

“Why, you know I’ll have none but you,” belowed Edward Hare. “Harry Rockhurst . . . ?” he cried. “Phew!”

He snapped his fingers and blew through them, threw himself into an attitude of defiance and, so doing, stumbled into his new-fangled sword which, carry it at whatever angle he tried, seemed ever in his way. Ratcliffe steadied his kinsman, then, still holding him by the elbow, drew him toward the stone bench, overhung by climbing roses. Having jerked his companion down upon it, he let himself

subside beside him, crossed his legs and proceeded, contemptuously, good-humoured yet incisive:—

"If I wed Mistress Harcourt, your sister, is't not a bargain? Shalt not continue to have bed and board and bottle beneath her roof? Aye, and many more of old Harcourt's round pieces to chirp in thy pockets at cockfight and hammer fair? And when we go to Whitehall . . ." He paused impressively.

Edward Hare was touched; his soft face became moved as by not distant tears.

"Good Lionel . . . dear coz! Odd's babers! Do I not tell thee thou shalt have her?"

Ratcliffe resumed, casting his words into space with a sidelong watchfulness as to their effect.

"Whereas, mark, if Diana wed another, what of thee, then, my cock? 'Tis back to the bare ancestral acres with Sir Edward Hare. 'Tis farthing toss and small ale. For thou art poor, lad, damned poor! And a poor baronet — fie!"

The poor baronet made a wry face. He pushed his plumed hat off his forehead to scratch his perplexed head.

"Aye, small ale, plague on it! Farthing toss — pooh!"

"'Twill ne'er do, eh, Ned!" laughed the other.

"No, split me, 'twill ne'er serve a man like me!"

Sir Edward Hare rose, in his indignation, and promptly tripped again over his sword. Somewhat abashed, and trying the comfort of a new angle, he dropped his high tone once more for one of plaint:—

"But, Lord, coz, what can I do? Di is like the bay filly: she'll neither lead nor drive. Ain't I always a-singing your praises? 'There's the husband for you, Di,' say I. 'There's the lad for me,' say I, twenty times a day."

Ratcliffe cursed his cousin in secret, as, rising in his turn, he clapped him affectionately on the shoulder.

"I marvel at you," he bantered. "And will you walk your filly to the gate and expect her to take it on the standstill? Is that the way to deal with a woman? Shouldst say to her: 'Hast noticed Cousin Lionel's squint? . . . Prithee, sister, have ne'er a thing to do with Cousin Lionel: 'tis a sad bad man! Ah, there are tales, sister, terrible tales!'"

Edward gaped.

"Oh, and what will she do then?"

"Why, look into mine eyes the very next time; and, not finding the squint, perhaps find something else, something in them she never marked before."

The young oaf nodded portentously.

"Aye," cried he, "and then —"

"And then — Why, I see you take me. Hast sharp wits, coz! — Then will she begin to ponder on those dark deeds of mine, and wonder about Cousin Lionel, and think him a very different man after all from the kinsman who played with her and teased her all her life. But, zounds, man, such a cock of the walk as thou art need not be lectured on the art of love! Why, when we get that figure of thine to Court, what a stir will there be among the beauties!"

The poor youth made no attempt to disguise his flattered emotion.

"Ecod," he smirked, looking down at his legs, "I'll not say but I can hold my own among the petticoats. He, he — a word in thine ear, Lionel: Moll, you know —" he whispered into his cousin's curls, laughing immoderately. "And little Prudence Prue, down at the Red Lion —" Here he whispered again and guffawed: "Odd's babers, she did! But Di must not hear of it."

With immovable gravity, the elder man submitted to these boisterous confidences; then, holding his cousin from him at arm's length, surveyed him with an irony which must have pierced through anything less thick-skinned:—

“What a blade you are ! There will be no holding you at Whitehall !”

He suddenly sighed, dropped his hands, shook his head, and assumed a tone of melancholy :—

“Heigho, but we must get thee to Court first ! And these adieus will undo all. ’Slife, man, she’s ripe for love. ’Tis rebound, ’tis nature. After the cold fit, the hot one. After old Harcourt, the old husband promptly and happily demised, Harry Rockhurst the stripling, live and young ! . . . After eighty, eighteen . . .”

“Nay,” interrupted Edward, sapiently. “Harry Rockhurst is twenty.”

“Aye,” mused Lionel, “and so is our pretty Di. Lord ! your worthy mother had scarce called out, ‘Oh,’ of Diana, before my Lady Rockhurst began her, ‘Ah,’ of that young whelp ! Well, by this time, these babes will have plighted their troth, if the gods interfere not.” He turned on Hare, his fierce temper escaping him for an unguarded moment : “Why the foul fiend did you let her ride over here to-day ?”

Ned swelled with dudgeon.

“I ? How could I prevent it, pray ?”

“Poor numskull, how couldst thou ?” echoed the other, half aside. — “Well, well, I fear me, I am

caught in my own springe! They might have philandered all summer and naught have come of it. . . . But I must needs work upon Grandam Chillingburgh, persuade her to summon the naughty grandchild in all haste from a bad match — and 'tis the parting will ruin all!"

He paused, biting his lip over vexed thoughts. Then his alert ear caught the fall of distant footsteps.

"Ah!" he cried, starting, "yonder they come! Let us to the upper terrace, Ned, and watch them from above."

Sir Edward, who had been endeavouring to hit a bumblebee with his whip, and was lost in the excitement of the sport, burst into a roar of self-applause at an unexpectedly successful stroke: —

"Saw you that? I hit him. I hit him! . . . A great bumblebee!"

Ratcliffe clenched his hand, exasperated. Then, recalling his self-control, shrugged his shoulders, caught his cousin by the arm, and marched him determinedly toward the upper terrace stairs.

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The two whose doings were exciting so much interest in Lionel Ratcliffe's mind, came slowly along the Peacock Walk and halted beneath the

watchers: a pair so well-matched in youth and looks as well to justify apparently the jealous kinsman's fears. — Harry Rockhurst, stripling just hardening into manhood, keeping some of his boy graciousness in the virility of the newer stage, sunburnt, vigorous; with brown curls tossed back from a broad forehead, and brilliant hazel eyes, keen and bold of vision, as should be those of the noted follower of hounds and hawk: by his side, as tall nearly as her cavalier, Diana Harcourt, the young widow, radiant with the sun on her auburn hair!

As her lover spoke to her, she listened, not unwillingly, and her glance rested on his face with pleasure. Yet there was something well-nigh maternal in this complacency which might have bidden him pause.

“Diana,” the boy cried passionately, “you must hear me; I will speak.”

She moved a pace from him and, sitting down on the bench, drew a hanging branch of wild rose to the wild rose of her cheek.

“The last of my country flowers,” she murmured.

“Stay,” he exclaimed. “Let me pluck you a posy!”

High over their unconscious heads, Lionel Ratcliffe, peering cautiously over the balustrade, had a

sneer for the childish eagerness. But Diana took the flowers with a simple grace.

"Thank you, and thank you. . . . Nay, how sweet they are! And to think that to-morrow evening we shall be so far away. 'Tis hard to leave the garden for the town."

("Mark you, now," whispered Ratcliffe overhead, nipping Hare by the arm, "and take a lesson in Dan Cupid's ways. 'Twill be: 'Think of me, and do not forget me!' And a prate of hopes, and a whisper of pledges. And then the word will hop out like a hot coal, Love! and their little world will be all ablaze — And 'twill be Love . . . Love . . . Love, and everything lost if some one be not at hand to spray cold water at the right moment.")

"The garden can?" suggests the practical Ned, in a mouthing undertone.

"Hush! lad," murmured the other, "hast yet to learn metaphor. Nay — hark! Not a breath, on thy life.")

"I shall dream, I think, of the gardens of Rockhurst," Diana was saying.

"The gardens?" echoed Harry. He was leaning against the wall, by the bench, looking down at her,

bending close. "Gardens? Is that all you regret, Mistress Harcourt?"

"Fie," smiled she, "I am not so ungrateful. Shall I not regret my friends, my neighbours, good Mistress Rockhurst, and yourself?"

The boy drew back and straightened himself, galled to the quick.

"My aunt — and me! Truly, I am, madam, I am proud." He flung himself away, his shoulder turned ostentatiously on Diana. She laughed with indulgence; then sighed. And, in heart-broken fashion, Harry caught up the sigh.

("First stage, sighs," reflected the watcher. "'Tis most harmless.")

Young Rockhurst's dudgeon was not of long duration. He edged along the wall to the bench and bashfully took seat.

"So ends the year," he said softly, "that brought me the happiness of paradise — Diana."

"Master Rockhurst . . ."

"Must it end thus?" Suddenly bold, he tried to take the fair hand idly clasping the posy.

"Take care, sir," she cried mischievously, "there are thorns here."

"Ah," he breathed, "so that I might gather the roses . . ."

(And above their heads, Lionel Ratcliffe: "Second stage: hand-clasps and protestations. Next will come kneeling work, and next the lips. — Wary now, for it goes rapidly!")

"Pray you, pray you, Harry!" Diana chid, endeavouring gently to free her hand.

But the boy had slipped the leash of his ardour and was not to be hushed.

"O my sweet life, hear me, hear me!"

"I vow," she said, half rebuking, "I never knew you in this mood!"

"Ah, I am bold," he panted. "Must I not be bold indeed for that I dare to love you!" Saying which, he fell on both knees before her.

("Is't not time to stop them?" whispered Hare into Ratcliffe's ear. "I could drop a little stone on sister Di's head.")

"Soft," interposed the other, with his contemptuous patience. "Let the children play a little while longer; 'twill be the finer sport to slip in 'twixt cup and lip!")

In truth, Ratcliffe was beginning to suspect that he had overrated Harry Rockhurst's influence. If he knew women, his fair cousin, below yonder, had given no real response. He had caught the note of indulgence which the wooer himself was too inexperienced to mark in her accents. True, there might lurk some danger even in this; yet not such as to call for indiscreet interference. He smiled sardonically as the lover's pleading rose passionately in the air.

"Give me hope, Diana — one word. Ah, madam, give me hope!"

But Mistress Harcourt rose and disengaged herself with some decision from the young man's grasp.

"Stay, Master Rockhurst, how can I listen to you? In truth, dear lad, you are over young to dream of such matters yet. Why, and what would my Lord Rockhurst say, could he but hear? Indeed, Harry, 'tis undutiful of you, without your noble father's sanction — I dare swear without even his knowledge."

"My father!" cried the boy, as if the words had struck him. "Alack," he added despairingly, "this sudden departure, upon which you have resolved,

has thwarted all my plans. Yet, madam, you are wrong; my father does know. I have writ him all my heart."

Diana turned the pale, fresh beauty of her face full in surprise upon the speaker.

"Aye — have you, indeed?" cried she. "And what says his lordship?"

The youth, emboldened afresh, pressed forward; but she kept him sweetly at arm's length, menacing him with her posy.

"He has not answered yet — could not have answered yet, madam. Natheless, I am his only child; he loves me: there can be but one answer. Diana, if that be all that stands between us —"

"Nay," she teased, "and shall I tell you your father's answer? 'Ah, Harry' (will his lordship say), 'have I kept thee secluded in the country, that thou mightest grow strong in health and virtuous in mind' — for these, we are told, are my Lord Rockhurst's reasons — 'and hast seen a young gentlewoman for the first time? Pack up, lad, pack and ride with me to London town; and in a week will't have forgotten her very existence!'"

"How little you know my father . . . how little you know me!" exclaimed the lover, with dignity.

“Alas, child, this is country innocence. Do I not know something of the ways of the great world! Your education has not yet begun, all respect to his lordship’s judgment. When he has shown you the Court, the town, the quality — ”

Harry Rockhurst interrupted her with a vexed laugh:—

“The Court, the town, the quality — why, madam, he will not even tell me of them. ’Tis only his duty as Captain of the King’s Yeomen and Constable of the Tower that keeps him from living here among us — the only life he deems worthy of a true gentleman: that of the owner on his estates. London, he says, is contamination. Therefore keepeth he me here, though it part him and me.”

She smiled and shook her head:—

“And how shall I find favour in the eyes of this strict gentleman?” she said, in the same fond tone of mockery. “I who am gay, and think not so ill of the town, and have no mind for sad faces and dull clothes! I fear me, Harry, your father is at heart a puritan!”

“My lord a puritan,” cried the boy, in fine scorn — “the King’s own private friend in exile, the hero of Worcester’s evil day . . . why, Diana, villainous Noll set a higher price on my father’s head than upon

any other in England, save his most gracious Majesty's own—sweet Mistress Harcourt, if that were your only fear—"

Greatly daring, he flung out his arm to encircle her. Swayed by his artless passion, Mistress Harcourt suffered the embrace, but it was with a kind of friendly tolerance.

A loud shout from above drove them apart.

"Cousin Di!—where can she be? Cousin Di, Master Rockhurst . . . !"

There was Lionel Ratcliffe, on the terrace above them, shouting into space through the hollow of his hands; and beside him Edward Hare, consumed with laughter.

Young Rockhurst stamped his foot; but Diana (not displeased, perhaps, at the interruption) glanced calmly up.

"Here I am, Cousin Lionel—and here, as you can see, is Harry."

Ratcliffe leant across the balustrade, wiping his face as though heated.

"Oh, how I have sought for you!" he called.

"So it seems," retorted she, ironically, "with apparently never a thought to cast a glance over the wall."

He grinned. She was the dearer to him for her sharp wits, and for a tongue that was even a match

for his own. But what answer he would have made was lost in a new interruption: the sound of a post-boy's horn rose swelling through the quiet airs, and almost immediately the bell clanged from the castle's gate. Then came calls, shouts, and rumours. Ratcliffe straightened himself from his leaning posture:—

“What have we here?” he cried. “Ha — Mistress Alicia!”

A stout, elderly lady appeared at the head of the terrace steps.

“Pardon me, madam, a moment,” said Harry to Diana, and ran to meet his aunt. The lady was beckoning with great energy:—

“News, lad, news from your noble father, from my dear brother!” She turned on the second step and raised her voice (never a soft one) in vigorous expostulation to some hidden person: “Hither, fellow, hither, thou laggard, and commend thee for a lazy loon!”

Stirred by these expostulations the postboy, covered with dust and sweat, emerged upon the terrace above at a limping run. Harry bounded up the steps to snatch a letter from his hands. He broke the seal and gave a cry of joy:—

“These are news indeed! My father will be with

us to-night, nay, toward the fifth hour afternoon, so he writes. — Rascal, you have tarried indeed! — In good truth, these are news!"

His joyful exclamations were lost in a deep outburst of lamentation from Mistress Rockhurst.

"To-day!" quoth she, clapping her palms together. "Murrain take me, if these be not the ways of men! Gilian! Basil! — get thee to the buttery, knave! — Robin! . . . Robin! the flag!"

But the excellent housewife was not of those who waste their energies upon mere speech. As hastily as her bulk would permit, she was already hying her way back toward the castle. And the clamour of her voice was lost behind the yew hedges. Harry bent over the parapet, calling to Diana, who stood pensively where he had left her.

"Give me joy, madam; my father will be here instantly!"

Ratcliffe brushed past him and came down the steps toward his kinswoman. He laid a hand upon her arm, and looking toward his host: —

"Then," cried he, "shall we leave you to your filial transport." He dropped his voice, to continue maliciously, in the young widow's ear: "Di, what says't thou? Shall we not ride instantly? Gad, were it but a meeting 'twixt lover and mistress

'twere something to wait for — but this business! 'My worthy father . . . My beloved son!' 'Twas ever a feast of cold veal, since the days of the prodigal — Though faith," he laughed, "'tis the father, here, comes from the husks to seek the calf at home!"

And while Diana gazed upon his sharp face with wonder and disfavour, Ratcliffe hailed Rockhurst once more: "Therefore, I say, good Master Harry, pray you bid them call up our horses."

Young Rockhurst protested. But Diana, to Ratcliffe's surprise and greatly to his satisfaction, instantly backed the request:—

"Indeed, Lionel is right; our presence is out of place at this meeting."

"Nay," implored Harry, and ran headlong down into the Peacock Walk again to catch her hand, "for pity's sake . . . no and indeed no, madam."

The lady disengaged herself, settled her roses, gathered her gloves and whip from the bench and looped her riding skirts. Then she turned, and, smiling, courtesied:—

"Indeed and indeed, yes, sir! And since farewell it must be, why, then, farewell!"

She wafted a kiss from her roses toward him.

"Ah, no!" he implored, still endeavouring to arrest her.

"Slife!" cried Lionel, impatiently looking up. "There rises the flag . . . there flies the noble blazon! Let it be the signal for us. Come Di — go, hurry the horses, Ned!" he shouted to Hare, who, astride on the upper balustrade, sat gaping down at them. "Blessings upon the Rakehell," he muttered to himself, as Diana motioned Harry on one side with decisive gesture.

"Nay, it is good-by," she was saying.

The boy caught her fingers and the roses together: —

"Oh, madam, will you turn all my joy into sorrow?"

Here the gate-bell clanged again.

"My father," cried Harry, starting toward the steps.

"Farewell," said Diana, "and —"

"Ah, no," cried the poor lover, distractedly, and ran back to fling himself once more before her.

"But a few minutes, dearest Diana!"

She hesitated before his distress. Lionel irritably seized her arm.

"Nay, child, you must come!" The touch, the tone were overmasterful. She flashed a haughty look upon him.

"Must! Cousin Lionel?"

Harry, seeing his advantage, pressed it ardently.

"Delay but for five minutes! Sure, 'tis not much to ask!"

"You foolish lad!" said Diana, gently. Then, smiling into the passionate eyes, "Yet I would not seem churl to you. And I will even wait these five minutes in the rose garden yonder. Your arm so far, an it please you, Lionel. But, I pray you, remember that there must be no musts from you to me."

She moved away with a very stately grace, Lionel, biting his lips upon a bitter smile, walking at her side. Harry stood gazing after her as one lost in a dream.

II

FATHERLY WISDOM

My Lord Rockhurst approached the wall of the upper terrace and looked down upon his son. His countenance, naturally grave, and stamped now with the pallor and fatigue of his lengthy ride, grew graver as he watched. Beside him, his sister threw up scandalised hands. But, as she was about to give voice to her feelings, he arrested her with a gesture, and went slowly to the top of the stairs. There he paused and called, —

“Harry!”

The boy started, wheeled round, rushed up the steps, and dropped on one knee before his father.

“My lord . . . my dear father!”

Lord Rockhurst raised him, looked a second keenly at the young face; then laying his hand upon his shoulder, walked down with him toward the bench, where, still without speaking, he took seat. Shaking her head at her nephew, Mistress Rockhurst followed them at some distance.

"Oh, sir," cried Harry, impetuously, "'tis ten months and two days since I last beheld your countenance!"

So saying, he was about to cast himself upon his father's breast; when, with the faintest motion of the hand, Rockhurst restrained him.

"And yet, didst show, even now, no undue haste to greet me. 'Tis the first time, Harry," he proceeded in softer tones, "that thou hast failed to welcome me before the gates. . . . I had looked forward to that moment."

"And indeed, nevvv," added Mistress Alicia, as she halted, panting, before him, "'twas not pretty acted. 'Where's Harry?' says his lordship. And 'twas old Giles held the stirrup, which had been thy privilege, Harry, since thou wert five years old."

Blushes chased each other over the boy's face. He could but stammer:—

"Oh, sir . . . oh, father!"

"Nay, no excuses!" bade the Lord Constable.

His son's cheek grew a darker crimson still.

"The lady, sir," he murmured, "the lady I wrote of —"

Mistress Rockhurst snorted with increased indignation, but Lord Rockhurst was now smiling dreamily.

"A lady! sayst thou? . . . Boy Harry and his lady! Nay, then, a petticoat is like charity and must needs cover a multitude of sins!"

"Petticoats, indeed," ejaculated under her voice the irate dame — "The hussy!"

Lord Rockhurst had no thought to spare for his sister's opinions just now. Holding Harry at arm's length, he surveyed him with shining eyes.

"Thou art grown a goodly lad. In faith, well-nigh a man!"

He drew him into his embrace and held him close a second. Then, releasing him, fell back with a sigh of ease upon the bench; flung off his mantle and unbuckled his sword, both of which Harry respectfully received from his hand.

The traveller sighed, took off his hat, and ran his fingers through his hair with the gesture of contented weariness.

"Another drop of cordial, my lord," cried his sister, rising, all eager for service.

"Nay," said he, motioning her back; "I have all the cordial I need here, Alicia. Come close, Harry. Dost know," proceeded the Lord Constable, as his son knelt beside him, "dost know I have ridden two hundred miles these days, with scarce as many minutes' rest, to put order into thy business? That

to-morrow I must e'en be jogging back again, for his Majesty has need of me? Thou presumptuous rogue!" He struck the lad on the shoulder as he spoke, and seriousness underlay his tone of banter. "Wouldst plot to make a grandsire of me already? Mark those pleading eyes, sister. . . . Even so did they look up at me when he stood no higher than my knee, and it was: 'Father, John blacksmith has so fair a pony to sell,' or 'Giles vows he will drown the red setter pup! O father, I want it!' Aye, child, thou hast a father, and 'tis well for thee!" His mouth twisted with a light contempt under the upturned moustache. "A widow!" he said.

"Aye," put in Aunt Alicia vindictively, "and a delicate, fine lady to boot. — Ah, nephew, did I not tell thee his lordship would set order here? What doth Mistress Harcourt care for still-room or buttery? Could she brew a bottle of gilly water? Nay — much less turn thee a pasty —?"

"Peace, peace, sister," rebuked his lordship. "Harry —" he turned tender, relentless eyes upon his son's quivering face, "thou, who wouldst get thee to begetting heirs already, what dost thou know of life?"

The youth rose to his feet, withdrew a pace, and looked earnestly at him.

"As much, my lord," he answered then, "as you have allowed me to know."

A moment the elder man seemed struck. He gazed down at his linked hands and reflected. Then he, too, got up. It was with an air of finality:—

"Faith, aptly replied! Therefore, son—" he took the lad's arm, "thou must still believe my will best for thee."

Harry caught up his father's hand.

"Nay, my lord, God forbid I should even question the wisdom of your dealings with me! Truly, I have never hankered after the town; and, if I have seen you ride forth alone with a heavy heart, it has only been because of the longing for your gracious company. But, father—" he clasped his other hand over the gloved one he held, "she loves the country, too, let Aunt Alicia say what she will." He shot a flaming look of reproach at the buxom lady. "And . . . and, we should be full content to dwell here forever if we were married, sir."

"Married!" echoed Rockhurst. He pulled his hand from his son's clasp and passed it caressingly over the beardless chin. "Aye, there's a cheek for a husband, truly!" (Mistress Alicia broke into

good-humoured laughter and struck her knees in applause.) "When thy beard is grown, we'll talk of such matters again."

"Oh, my lord," pleaded the lover. "What of my age? — since you yourself were married when no older than I am, as our Bible leaf shows. Say nothing, at least, till you have seen her! She is here, father, even now, in the rosary! Alack, she has ridden hither to bid farewell, for to-morrow she sets out for London town. And, oh, father, may I not escort her?"

"To London!" exclaimed the father. His face grew dark with a heavy frown. "To London! No, sir, not within fifty miles of the Babylon! How now, art grown so bold?"

"I thought not of the town," stammered Harry; "I thought but of the perils of the road for her." Then, gaining assurance, he proceeded: "Even here there is talk of Claud Du Vall and such bold ruffians. Sir Edward, her brother . . . Sir Edward, in truth, is a poor fool, my lord — And Mr. Ratcliffe, her cousin, who rides with them, him I mightily mistrust. You have given me your blood, father — will you blame me now because it will not run obediently when I think of danger to my lady?"

"Nay, if thy body kept pace with thy spirit," mocked Rockhurst, "what a beard wouldst soon have, my callow son!" Yet, though he mocked, anger had fled from his glance to be replaced by fatherly pride.

The tears rose to Harry's eyes. The young can endure severity better than irony.

"Indeed, I am a child no longer, — I am ever your dutiful son, sir, — but I cannot give up Diana. My lord, do but see her; see her now . . . !"

"Now?" cried the other, surprised. Then recollecting himself: "True, didst say she was in the garden." His eye grew ever more indulgent. "See her, lad," he went on, "aye, truly. For what other purpose had I ridden all these weary miles?"

With the youth, all was once more sunshine, where, before, there had been but clouds.

"Ah, father, I knew your indulgence would never fail me. Nay, I will conduct her to you, on the instant."

He started to run, as he spoke. Rockhurst watched the figure out of sight, then laughed low to himself and turned to his sister.

"I will conduct her to you, on the instant," he repeated. "Aha — and doubtless the pretty widow will come as meekly at his bidding to display herself

as ever heifer to the fair. *O rustica simplicitas!*" And laughing, he came back to the bench and sat down.

"Indeed, my lord," said Mistress Alicia, with as much disapproval as she dared to show to the head of the house, "here is no matter for laughing. 'Tis an excellent thing, my lord, that you should forbid Harry from marrying the Widow Harcourt. And truly, as you say, he's not fit to wed for some four or five years to come. And, of a certainty, she's scarce the woman to manage a household like this, brother; not such as I should care to trust with the keys. And I think you'll not refuse me the credit to say, brother, that I have become them well these five years. Since, with his Majesty's most happy Restoration, your lordship also has come to your own again, and placed me at the head of your house — I trust, I say, I have become the charge."

"Indeed, none better," said Rockhurst, absently.

The lady glanced at him sidelong. Her comely face took an air of indecision, almost of timidity, foreign to the massive severity of its lines. Something she had on her mind, that yet she feared to utter. But lack of courage could never be the failing of a Rockhurst.

"And, indeed, my lord, so long as you keep the lad mewed up here, as if he were a girl, 'tis not to be expected that he should get rid of such like maggots in his head. Why, the town's the place for a gallant young gentleman like Harry. Your only son, my lord, your heir! Think on it. Why, Court's the place for him, and you so rarely in his Majesty's favour! He'd sing another song there, I warrant you."

Once again the father's face grew dark.

"'Tis my bird, sister; I'll have him sing the song I choose."

"But surely, brother," argued the doughty lady, scarlet in the face, "with you to watch over him, with your example —"

"With my example!" He turned suddenly and fiercely on his sister: "No, by the Lord, not even with such valuable aid as that, will I trust my fine lad into that sink — that charnel-house — that pit! Ah, you think yourself so wise, and prate of what you know not — poor innocent old country virgin. I tell thee, woman, the taint is in the very air. Eyes, ears, nay, every pore, are channels for the poison —"

"Brother!" ejaculated Mistress Rockhurst, huffed and startled.

But Rockhurst proceeded, his eyes fixed more as if talking to himself than to her: —

“There, shame grows dearer than merit — vice becomes as a cloak, warm and soft, in which a man takes comfort. At the mere thought of cold virtue, of stern duty, of naked purity, ugh ! we shiver and hug ourselves —”

His sister gave a faint, shocked cry, and flung out her hand :—

“But not you, not you, my lord ! Surely these are strange words.”

“Harry shall be a man of better stuff,” the father cried. “He’s wholesome now, body and soul, and by the Lord, I say, I’ll keep him so ! How now, Alicia, shall I not have pure-blooded, pure-hearted grandchildren, an I have the mind ?”

For some unknown reason the excellent lady took deep umbrage at this last remark.

“Surely, surely !” she repeated, tossing her head, so that her grey curls danced.

“So let it be, then,” bade her brother. Then, in a changed voice he exclaimed :—

“Hush, now, here comes the country widow. Faith, the lad hath taste.”

But here he fell suddenly silent and sprang up. Mistress Rockhurst, surveying him in some anxiety, marked the extraordinary change that came over his countenance.

"As I am a sinful woman" (she afterward told her special gossip), "his lordship turned whey-white. And I do assure you, madam, his eyes blazed in his head — the like of which I have never seen before. 'Twas almost as if he and she had known each other and had never dreamed to meet again. And as for my fine young madam, she came along with her eyes on the ground — nay, the most bashful thing between this and York City. But when she looks up and sees my lord, as white as he went, she goes rosy, and, please you, gives a kind of cry with both her hands outstretched. That may have been artfulness. And if so, my lord met it even as I could have wished; for he but made her a deep bow, and, says he presently, in his very grand way, 'It gives me pleasure, madam, to make your acquaintance.' At which you should have seen how was taken aback the widow! 'Make your acquaintance' (mark me), says he, which shows he could not have known her before, after all."

Harry, who had brought his lady in such pride beneath his father's glance, stood somewhat dashed in the silence that followed Lord Rockhurst's ceremonious greeting. By nature the most unsuspecting of youths, in his simple existence he had never felt the necessity of studying inner motives in

those around him. He knew the tricks of bird and beast, but the secrets of his fellow-creatures he guessed not at. And so all the tokens that his aunt's shrewd eye had noted were lost upon him. His father had been a trifle over-ceremonious toward a fair neighbour, let alone the mistress of his son's heart. And she, his dear love, had blushed and grown pale, as was but natural.

"Well, sir," he cried at last, anxiously, "now that you have seen Mistress Harcourt, do you not give me some reason?"

His father turned a singular glance upon him.

"Reason enough, lad," he said, under his breath, "reason enough for any folly!"

Diana's clear cheek had now resumed its usual pretty tint; but as her young lover spoke, it deepened; and at Rockhurst's words, faded again slightly.

"Nay, my lord," said she, speaking for the first time — her voice was low and troubled — "I know not what Master Harry hath been saying of me. It is his kindness that he will think so well of me, and — nay, I must say it, Harry — 'tis his foolishness that he will not understand that he is over-kind."

Rockhurst took Diana's hand from his son's hold, where it still rested unconsciously. Many

thoughts were in his mind, as strangely conflicting as the forces in his nature. His keen knowledge of women and their ways told him that no woman who loved a man would have let her fingers lie so listlessly in his grasp. "My poor lad — she has no heart for him," cried the father in him. But the man in him, as yet unsubdued by years or sorrow, rejoiced. Here was one who, nameless to him, had yet shone like a star in his troubled sky this many a month, for the sake of one hour, snatched, sweet, pure, sacred, out of an unworthily spent life. With all that was best in him, he had wished to keep her unknown, unattainable; and here she was, brought back by fate into his path!

No one could have guessed at the storm seething within him after his moment of self-betrayal. His usual polished composure governed face, voice, and gesture.

"My son has told me much about you, madam, truly," he was saying; "and yet I see how little he has been able to tell me."

'Twas the merest idle compliment. The words were as artificial as the tone. Diana courtesied in silence. Not thus did she remember her grave, chivalrous protector in an hour of doubt and peril. Nay, then, that memory had best be effaced from

her mind, since it was his pleasure to deny it. Perchance (and the thought was more galling to her pride!) though she had so fondly kept his image in the deep recesses of her soul, hers had already faded from his thoughts.

"Indeed, my lord," she began, rallying her spirits, "I too—" but she paused, for her brother and Lionel Ratcliffe were approaching, the latter with his cool air of indifference, the other all agape with curiosity.

Harry instantly took the younger man by the arm to present him to his father.

"One moment," rebuked Rockhurst; "the lady is speaking. Pray, madam?"

"Oh, my lord," said she, with formal grace, "the poor sentence was, certes, never worth such courteous attention. I was but about to say that I, too, have heard of your lordship often."

"Aye? From what source?" he asked, and a shadow fell on his face.

But she was smiling.

"From this source," she answered him, waving her roses toward Harry.

"Ah," cried Rockhurst, laughing upon a sigh, "no doubt the rogue has full wearied you with the subject."

"Alas," she responded quickly, "must I not take this reproach to myself?"

Lionel Ratcliffe pulled young Rockhurst by the sleeve.

"What, all agaze and bewildered, Harry? Never fear, these are but Court wits in a friendly bout. Clink, clink, the sparks fly. But, hark to you, beware an unfoiled weapon."

The boy withdrew from his touch with disfavour, and Rockhurst turned upon the whisperer a haughty look of enquiry.

"Well met again, my lord," cried Ratcliffe, swaggering a step forward and saluting with a cavalier sweep of his hat.

Rockhurst returned the courtesy with a ceremonious inclination.

"Have we met before, sir?" he enquired.

No whit abashed, Ratcliffe replaced his felt with the very latest twist of the wrist.

"Does your lordship make it a practice, then, of not taking your memory out of town? To be sure, memory is a mighty inconvenient chattel at times. Natheless, 'tis a fact your lordship and my humble self have met at the same board. Did I not share with your lordship, last winter, the privilege of being the guest of the pretty Mantes?"

"Enough — I remember you, sir," said his lordship.

"Egad," laughed Ratcliffe, with elaborate geniality, "I, sure, did take special note of your lordship, that night, seeing you with the nymph, our hostess, whom, I mind me, you had but just whisked from under the very nose of Jove. Nay, not the first time (if report spoke truly) that Old Rowley has been cut out by the Rake —"

The words were arrested on his lips by a look as sharp as a sword: —

"You have too long a memory, sir. Shorten it. — My son," added the speaker, turning his shoulder upon Ratcliffe, "you were about to introduce the young gentleman to me."

"My brother, Sir Edward Hare, my lord," said Diana, forestalling her lover.

The interlude with Ratcliffe had perturbed the group; and with gracious instinct she sought to cover her cousin's insolence and young Rockhurst's rising anger at insinuations incomprehensible to country dwellers, yet the hostile intent of which was but too transparent. Sir Edward, however, was far from assisting her purpose.

"Nay, brother, brother," she whispered, as the bumpkin nodded sulkily. "Doff thy hat."

"I tell thee, Di," murmured the injured youth, "'tis he owes me two bows and a scrape. Ecod: 'the lady's speaking,' quotha! And I with my best leg already drawn out for him!"

"Your lordship must excuse our rustic manners," said Diana, with a pretty glance, half humorous, half pleading.

Rockhurst looked at her a second musingly. — Yes, grace, youth, sweetness, all were hers! And fate had so worked that it was she who was to embody his son's young love dream! Dear lad . . . small blame to him! He gave an unconscious sigh. To his countenance came back that air of kindness which Harry had missed in it so singularly since the meeting with Diana.

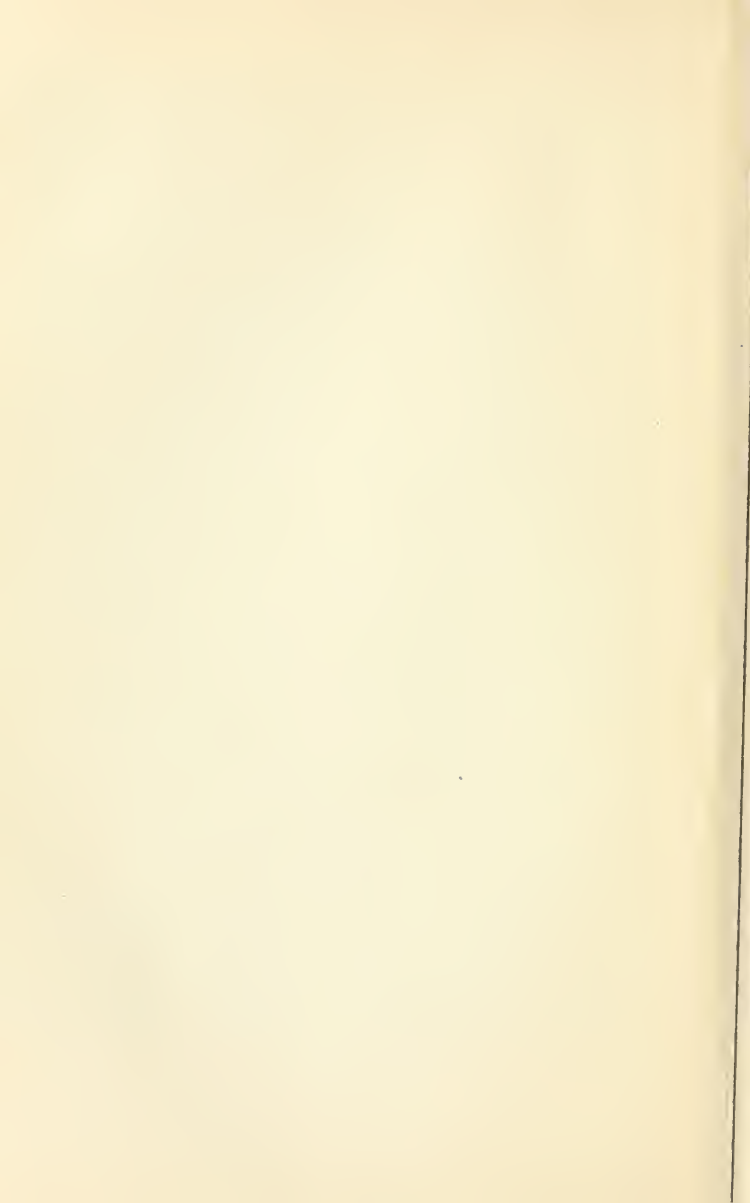
"Of your leave, my son," said he, then, "I will have a few minutes' converse with Mistress Harcourt apart."

Harry pressed his father's hand in delighted response. He leant back against the sunny wall and watched his mistress go in grace beside the stately figure of the great Lord Rockhurst. Lionel took place beside him, and from narrowed lids looked smilingly at the young man's happy countenance.

Mistress Rockhurst, who, solemnly seated at the end of her bench, had been a silent yet mightily



Lionel took place beside him and from narrowed lids looked smilingly at the young man's happy countenance.



observant witness of the whole scene, now, suddenly struck by the discontented expression of Edward Hare's visage, addressed the youth:—

“What ails ye, Sir Edward?”

“I'm sick at stomach,” growled the candid baronet. “I hate a peacock.”

“Yet peacock is light fare,” said the lady, with a twinkle in her shrewd blue eye. “Sick at stomach, say you? There's nothing better than a cup of marjoram water.”

Sir Edward flung the suggestion from him:—

“Water? Ugh!”

“When I say water,” amended she, “'tis strong water, *aqua vitæ*.”

“Aye,” quoth he, then, “that's another matter. I'm not saying but a tass of it would warm the innards.”

She despised him heartily for a monstrous poor scion of a noble family; yet the housewife was too strong in her to resist the pleasure of ministering out of her store, even to an unworthy guest. She rose, chuckling, jingling her keys:—

“Oh, surely, surely,” she exclaimed, “this small comfort shall not be denied you here, Sir Edward. Come but with me.”

III

THE NEW FRENCH PASS

ROCKHURST and Diana, at the extreme end of the terrace, stood alone in the sunshine, with the June roses about them. — How much more apart now than on that night in the snow between the black fir trees and the waste heath! She flung a sudden, eager look at him; but before the smooth courtesy with which he turned to her, drew back into herself, once more checked and puzzled. It was to be as if they had only met in a dream? So be it! Then the thought that he must now regard her as his son's choice broke upon her in a flash of revelation — and anger. Why had she dallied with such folly? With an involuntary movement she loosened her grasp on Harry's roses and they fell round her feet.

"Why, madam," said Rockhurst, with a forced smile and a perfunctory solicitude, "your posy, madam, all in the dust! Nay, permit me to cull another for you."

The man of the world had superseded all else. To place his years in rivalry with his son's youth, the

King's Lord Constable against the country lad? Preposterous!

Lionel Ratcliffe stood attentively watching his kinswoman from afar. Beside him, Harry sat, dreaming, his young eyes fixed on God knows what golden vision. All at once the elder man tapped his companion stealthily on the arm.

"What is it?" cried Harry, starting from his muse and glancing round none too pleasantly. "What is it now?" quoth he, frowning.

"Look, look yonder, Master Rockhurst. Your roses."

Harry's glance followed the direction of the pointing finger. He saw Diana stand, a radiant vision in the amber light, with empty hands outstretched toward the flower that Rockhurst was in the act of gathering, a deep crimson rose that glowed like a ruby in the sun-rays. And about her feet the pale, sweet blossoms chosen for her with such love, but an hour ago! The red rose was carried to Diana's cheek; and then she fastened it in her bosom. His flowers had not been so honoured. He could not think or reason; he could only look and suffer.

Again Lionel tapped him on the shoulder. He was smiling. Harry came back to his senses at sight of that odious smile.

"Well, sir, and what of it?" he cried, measuring Ratcliffe with a defiant look.

"What of it? More than you think. — What were you about, young man," his voice sunk to a whisper, "when you invited Rakehell Rockhurst to come and view your lady?"

"Rakehell Rockhurst . . .!" echoed Harry in utter amazement. Then, fury leaping to his voice and eye, he wheeled fiercely upon Ratcliffe: "Of whom, sir, are you speaking?"

The latter proceeded, unmoved save for a trifle more of emphasis in his silky tone:—

"Did you not know that a single breath of his lips is enough to tarnish the virtue of the purest woman in England?"

The younger man fell back a step, and measured the speaker:—

"Of whom are you talking, I have asked you."

There was more self-control in his demeanour, but more danger. It was tense with menace, like a bent bow. A second Ratcliffe paused. He had not given the lad credit for so much real manliness. The more reason for him to precipitate the crisis for which he was working; the crisis which might rid him of two rivals at once—for the courtly Rockhurst was indeed a rival to be reckoned with.

And there was no affectation in the passion with which he now broke out: —

“Of whom, good lad? Of whom? ——”

(Edward Hare, strolling out of the dim coolness of the buttery into the sunshine again, heard the sound of loud voices rising from the terrace below. Grinning, he advanced on tiptoe and bent over the parapet to listen. Cousin Ratcliffe and young Harry were at it at last! Even to his dull wits it had been evident that the quarrel that had long been smouldering between them was bound to break into open flame. Better than a wench or a bottle, better even than cockpit or bear-bait, Sir Edward loved the sight of a fight between his fellow-men. He chuckled as he hearkened.)

“Of whom, good lad, of whom — but the most noble Viscount, in town the incomparable libertine, his Majesty’s merry friend, known by Whitehall as Rakehell Rockhurst — in the country, thy sainted father! Aye, but, town or country, let Rockhurst get to windward of a pretty woman, and the devil will soon show his —”

Harry had stood a moment petrified, but before the last words were out he had struck Lionel on the lips:—

"Liar!"

Lionel staggered back; a narrow streak of blood was running down his chin. In a second he had whipped out the light riding sword that hung by his hip, and without a word made a deadly rush. Harry, however, strong country lad, trained by all the sudden accidents of sport and chase, had his wits about him. He stepped aside from the onslaught, caught up the cloak which lay on the balustrade, and flung it across the blade.

"Now, if you please," said he, shaking his father's sword free of the scabbard, whilst Ratcliffe, almost foaming at the mouth, struggled with the encumbering folds as if it had been his enemy himself, "let us continue the argument."

It was a prettier fight than ever it had been Edward Hare's luck to behold at feast or fair. In an ecstasy he hung over the parapet, jumping from one foot to the other.

"Sh! Sh!" he shouted, "at it, good dogs! Ecod, I would not have missed this for forty crowns! Ha, well pushed, cousin!"

Young Harry staggered, waved his sword aimlessly, then dropped it, pivoted on himself, and fell. He lay, face downward, and after a moment a coil of blood, like a slender serpent, began to move sinuously into the grey of the gravel.

The peacock, from his perch, peered down on the scene with stupid eyes, cocking its tufted head inanely from side to side.

The approving smile was petrified on Edward Hare's face. He clapped his hand over his mouth like a frightened child.

"Dead, ecod!" he whispered to himself. Then, hanging further over the wall, he hailed Ratcliffe in a quavering shout:—

"Hist, coz — hast never killed him?"

The victor, leaning on his weapon, gazing in sombre abstraction at the prostrate form, started and looked up. He smiled hideously with his swollen lip.

"Be it mortal?" mouthed Edward again.

Ratcliffe answered stonily:—

"Mortal? I trust so. The affront was mortal."

Then he slowly wiped his blade upon the cloak, sheathed it with care, and walked steadily away, along the path that led to the valley.

Hare watched him go, till the dark laurel bushes

received and hid him. Then he looked over again at the motionless figure, and in a panic, sent loud calls ringing into the air: "Help here! Hoy — Hello! Master Rockhurst hurt, ill, — dead! Help!"

Rockhurst was the first to hear the cry. In a trice he was back in the Peacock Walk, kneeling by the bench. Hare was at his heels, gabbling his tale. Half his words went unheeded, but some found their mark in the father's heart:—

"And Lionel says: 'Rakehell Rockhurst' (he, he!). 'A devil with the women!' says he. And Harry hits him across the mouth. 'Liar!' says Harry. Oh, 'twas a pretty quarrel. 'Twas a cracking slap!—"

As Rockhurst lifted his boy and supported him in his arms, light came back to the eyes so dark in the white face, and, stretching himself, Harry returned to consciousness and smiled up at his father like a waking child. Rockhurst tore the stained clothing apart with fierce hands, then drew a deep sigh of relief. His experience in such matters took stock of the wound — an ugly tear in truth, long, laying bare the ribs, but not deep.

"'Tis not vital—thank God! Go, call for help, man!" cried he sharply, looking up at the staring

Edward. And off trotted the lout. Now came Diana, hastening, bewildered.

Lovers have quick ears: through the dimness of his returning consciousness Harry caught the sound of her steps. He tried to raise himself in his father's embrace. There was a sudden shame upon him that he had done so womanish a thing as to swoon, this day when, of all days, he had so much reason to play the man.

"'Tis a mere scratch, my lord," he murmured. Then, with an anxious glance on his father's face, he added, stammering: "Master Lionel was showing me a new French pass, and I — I slipped —" He broke off; never before had he seen tears in his father's eyes.

With a flutter like that of a settling bird, Diana sank on her knees beside them. With a soft cry, full of ruth, she took her boy lover's hand. As he had passed her, running on Lord Rockhurst's errand, her brother had bellowed his tidings:—

"A pretty quarrel! About you, sister! Ecod — there was talk about your virtue — and Master Harry's slap, and Coz Lionel out with his tuck —"

As with the sting of arrows the words drove her forward. Ah, she needed no further telling to conjure up the scene: her kinsman had spoken lightly

of her and her young lover had struck back the insult. Her boy lover! His youth, that had been his disability in her eyes, now became eloquent to plead for him. To see him lie there, pale and blood-stained, a mere lad. — After the way of women, on the moment her heart melted all to him.

"Harry, Harry! . . ." she cried, and the words were tender as a caress.

Harry turned his languid head.

"And now I cannot ride with you to-morrow — not even did my lord so permit! Father . . . !" Faintness was creeping over him again, but he made an effort. His voice rang out: "Father, will you escort her? My Diana!"

It was at once a supreme declaration of confidence and a solemn charge. The father bowed his head.

"Your Diana, lad, so be it — I accept the trust."

Over the poor wounded body the eyes of Rakehell Rockhurst met those of Diana. There was a steady sweetness of renunciation in his, that she had seen there once before. Hers were quickly veiled again, lest they betray the singular, sharp pain that filled her heart.

At her swiftest gait, important, yet showing no alarm, Mistress Rockhurst advanced, followed by a

couple of wenches, bearing varied paraphernalia. She had lived through the wars — it were a parlous wound indeed she could not cope with. In her own hands she carried a flask of renowned cordial. None too soon, it seemed, for the colour on the pretty boyish head lying between Rockhurst and Diana was fading fast again.



THE KING'S CUP



THE KING'S CUP

I

LITTLE SATAN

A SWIFT thunder-storm had rushed down the Thames valley, passed over sultry London with clamour and hail scourge, and was gone — as sudden and wholesome as a good man's passion. The town lay, a little dazed, it seemed, gasping as one astonished, yet mightily refreshed.

In the gardens of the Temple every leaf dripped and shone the brighter; the dry earth drank and sent up a fragrance to mingle with the scent from the historic rose-bushes of the inner pleasance, the glory of which now lay scattered, white and red, on the turf, each petal with the tears in its heart glinting under that sky of incomparable blue that reveals itself after the squall.

Down the steep slope from King's Bench Walk, mimic mountain torrents rushed in haste, seeking the river which rolled, heaving still, a troubled

yellow, in angry ebb toward the east, where the clouds still lowered in their flight.

Even in Whitefriars — that strange, knavish demesne lying at the very gates of the great legal college; that debatable land of crime, of statutory or at least traditional immunities — every dark lane had been swept as with besoms, if not clean, at least less foul. The stale airs of *Alsatia* (as the cant word went to express that sanctuary of tricksters and cheats and huffing bullies, of skulking debtors, rejected clergymen, and disbarred lawyers, of gaudy courtesans in enforced retreat) were driven forth before the fresh and mighty breath of the gale. The gutters ran gurgling, overflowing where they would. Here and there a choked conduit sent mock waterfalls from overhanging eaves, darting and splashing even to the opposite walls. All *Alsatia*, which had scuttled to its burrows, was beginning to pop its head out again; but, as the denizens in the 'Friars have, as a rule, rare change of garment, few ventured as yet into the slop and drip.

Thus the two youthful gallants who now emerged from the Half Moon Tavern, in Priory Lane, had the length of the street to themselves.

“*Quelle peste* — !” said the slighter and darker of the two.

Stepping gingerly aside to give wide berth to the dismal carcase of a cat, he received the spray from an odorous gutter-spout full in the neck—and again exclaimed in French against the pestilential offence of the place.

His companion nipped him by the elbow, as he himself, less fastidiously, strode over the carcase.

“Fie, Vidame,” he cried, “’tis well we’re not at Whitehall! Never forget ’tis a forbidden word, just now.”

The Vidame Enguerrand de Joncelles tossed his black curls with a somewhat scornful look at the speaker.

“In verity, Sir Paul,” he retorted, in his precise, quaintly emphasized yet fluent English, “I believe that, eating, drinking or sleeping, Court rules and Court favour are never out of your head! As for the —” his long dark eyes glinted mischievously — “as for the ugly distemper which begins with a letter P. in both our tongues, what have people of quality to do with it? Bah! it is to kill the *canaille* — useful, like rat-bane.”

“Yet . . . if you will come into Alsatia —” grumbled Sir Paul Farrant; and just then, a gush of intolerable stench striking across them from an

open cellar door, he drew his laced kerchief from his breast and buried nose and mouth in its folds.

The Frenchman went steadily on, scarce a flicker of disgust on his narrow, pale face. — If high-born disdain was safe to keep the plague at a distance, certes the Vidame de Joncelles—King Charles’s new favourite page at Whitehall—was proof against it.

There was silence between the comrades, until the worn, muddy steps of the Temple-Gate brought them up from the unwholesome precincts of Whitefriars into the green and airy spaces of the King’s Bench Walk. There, shaking out his kerchief, Sir Paul resumed his interrupted complaint: —

“If you will come to Alsatia . . .”

“If your misunderstanding townsfolk will drive the best fence master within your shores to take sanctuary in yonder pit—for the merest peccadillo —”

“Peccadillo, Vidame! —Why, the man drew on our host of the Three Tuns in Westminster, and slit both his ears, for refusing to serve him with a flagon of claret on trust . . . !”

“*Perdi*, a wretched innkeeper! It was an insolence that deserved worse — The hog is not dead! — Meanwhile, instead of suiting my convenience

and practising my sword-play in Westminster, I must now come seek him in this pestilent lane!"

"Why, Master Enguerrand," said Farrant, standing still on the wet sod to stare, half in amazement, half in admiration, at the Vidame, "the fellow owed him a reckoning as long as his sword."

"And what of it? Is not such a master as Laperrière, whose lot in life it is to deal with us nobles, one of those whom gentles daily cross sword with and condescend to take instruction from, is not such an one to be privileged? A reckoning, forsooth! A master of fence, with us in France, Sir Paul, is held a gentleman. Our King has even ennobled many. And those others there, the rabble — are they not made and born for our service? As for the rest, as for this Plague that is about, speak no more of it. If you are so frightened of a little smell, what brings you day by day to the fencing room with me? — It is your own doing."

"Aye," said Farrant. "But think you," he went on in hurt tones, "I would let you alone to such dangerous grounds as Whitefriars — you a stranger and my friend, Vidame?"

They were strolling slowly down across the gardens toward the river stairs. The Vidame, as if tired by his exertions in the fencer's room,

let himself drop on a stone bench in the central alley.

"Let us rest awhile, please you, Sir Paul. As you see, the tide is still running out. The turn, which is to take us back to Whitehall, is not due until after five o'clock. Let us wait here."

He doffed his plumed beaver and hung it upon the cane by his side; then turned his pale, dissipated face, with a smile of cynical amusement, toward his companion. Sir Paul Farrant was only one of the many friends who had gathered so assiduously about the young Frenchman — a page in the train of Madame Henriette, sister of the King — since his Majesty had taken so strong and sudden a fancy to him as to retain him in his personal service after her departure for France.

"See how the world wags," resumed the favourite then; "you, Sir Paul, seek the dens yonder," — he pointed to the sinister purlieus they had just left behind, — "because of a friend — I, because of an enemy."

Farrant pricked his ears under his silken, fair curls. It was the first time he had been admitted even so far into the Vidame's confidence. This Enguerrand, a French boy who in a few months' time had stepped, it seemed, without the slightest

effort into the inner circle of Court favour, upon the outer rim of which the indefatigable Sir Paul had scarce a footing, was an enigma to his associates. He had a handsome sister; but his success depended not on her, for had she not denied the King for the sake of the King's friend, Lord Rockhurst? It was an open secret in Whitehall. Enough to have damned the chances of any other man, it would seem! Yet here was the lad, with his white, handsome, secret face; with his silent, insolent, easy ways; with his deep moods, his sudden rages, as close to his Majesty, as audacious and as secure of his position as young Monmouth himself. Farrant had witnessed his first introduction — he knew that there was no secret tie, no mystery save in the new page's own personality. Sir Paul, the failure, would have given all he possessed for the talisman. Yet the talisman was no such occult thing, but an unfailing talent to amuse that most melancholy man, whom the world liked to call the Merry Monarch.

"An enemy, say you, my good Enguerrand?" cried the young baronet, lifting his foolish eyebrows a trifle higher than nature had set them. He had the curiosity of trivial natures and was all agog.

"Aye, *perdi*," responded the other, briefly.

The wind was ruffling his dark head, blowing the

heavy curls off the forehead; making patent at once the extreme youth and the prematurely worn countenance.

"And you are then a-practising against a ren-counter. . . . O, Master Enguerrand, I pray you that I be your second!"

"Why, you shall so, then." The words dropped from the other's lips in careless condescension.

Enguerrand's eyes were lost in space. Across the river, between the merry, white, flying clouds and the green fields of Surrey, he saw Heaven knows what bloody vision of triumph.

"And he — the man, the enemy?" asked Sir Paul, after a while.

"Him whom I shall kill . . . with that little escaping thrust of our Laperrière . . . yes, it shall be that . . . the great man? Yet none so great, Sir Paul, but that he must himself defend his honour . . . and none so old but that he be as much man as I — even as I am none so young but that I am as much man as he . . ."

At which cryptic utterance he folded his delicate lips on silence.

Farrant stared. There was one to whom the words applied; one to whom the brother of Madame de Mantes, as all Whitehall was aware, might well

owe grudge. But, forsooth, that one was so high placed, a personage of so much importance, that he dismissed the idea as preposterous. Farrant indeed had many a secret grudge himself against this powerful being, against his haughtiness and the lash of his cold mockery; but he would as soon have dreamed of seeking satisfaction from his Majesty's own person.

Enguerrand had fallen into a deep muse. His comrade began to find the silence tedious, and took to counting the passage of the barges through the opening of the Temple water-gate, chattering in comment:—

“Yonder went the fat master of the Curriers, Tyrrell, with his pretty daughter—would I had as good a chance with her as that stout prentice who sits behind the good man's back . . . ! Ah, and yonder went Master Lionel Ratcliffe—mark how his men pull as if life and death depended on their oars. I'll wager you, he's bound for Chillingburgh House. . . . But, no, the skiff keeps its nose down-stream. . . . The tide will soon be on the turn.—Eh, as I live, here comes a royal barge—mark the swing of the scarlet oars! Old Rowley himself, perchance—nay, sink me, it is but the Lord Constable! Odd! I was thinking of him but a moment awhile. . . . I . . . 'Slife, there's no mistaking that dark

figure! I vow he casts a shade over the royal scarlet itself. Merry Rockhurst, quotha! Has any one ever seen him smile, except in mockery? How now? Why, the barge heads for the Temple stairs! — What may the Constable of the Tower be seeking in the Temple?"

The babble died abruptly on his lips, so singular a change had he marked coming over his companion's face: a spasm of vindictiveness followed by a slow, evil smile. A chill ran through Farrant's frame. He was no coward, but he would have given much to recall his rash offer of a few minutes ago; for he had read in the Vidame's eyes the name of his enemy.

The barge swung with masterly ease to the landing. A quick word rang out from the head waterman, and the glistening oars were tossed in the air. The red of the men's jackets, the crimson of the barge's drapery, stained to rich depths and unexpected tints of orange by weather and usage, made a gay picture amid the sparkle of the water, the dancing shine and shadow, in which the figure of the Lord Constable was indeed a note of striking gravity.

The wind-ruffled feathers of the beaver were black, even as the curls that fell on his shoulders. A black cloak, silver-trimmed, was cast loosely back as he

stepped from the barge, revealing a body-dress of so sombre a purple as to seem, if possible, of more severe a tone than the cloak. The keen, pale face, with the hawk's eyes, the silver amid the raven-black of the cavalier moustache and beard, — which it was the great Lord Rockhurst's pleasure to preserve in spite of the newer, clean-shaven fashion, — all combined to produce a singularly impressive personality.

Paul Farrant felt upon himself that sense of obtrusive inferiority, of almost physical discomfort, which the presence of the Lord Constable scarcely ever failed to evoke. His lips formed themselves for a soundless whisper. He twirled his grey beaver on the end of his cane; and, upon a second thought, tossed it to his head as giving him an air of greater ease and self-possession.

The French boy's countenance, on the contrary, seemed now to have become lit by a kind of inner fire that was almost like inspiration. Sir Paul heard him speak to himself, in French — a tongue which he knew but imperfectly:—

“He has come! Why not now . . . why not this moment! . . . *Pardi*, why not, my Lord Rockhurst?”

As he muttered the words the Vidame laid his

hat and stick deliberately on the bench and rose. Farrant, his discomposure increasing well-nigh to horror, watched him step forward, tossing back his heavy locks, as raven-black as Rockhurst's own; and in the pallid, fine-cut young face he noted for the first time an odd resemblance to Rockhurst himself.

In the minutes that next followed, while his English friend remained sitting as if spellbound, Enguerrand, the stranger in the land, went through the crisis of his life.

So swiftly did the scene pass that the men in the barge below had but the time to push off once more and swing but a single stroke on the return journey to the humour of the tide.

Rockhurst, walking sedately up the alley, with a sweep of his tall cane to every other step, halted as he saw the young man approach; and into his gaze, which had been somewhat abstractedly fixed upon the fair green of the garden, there flashed a strange look.

Sir Paul Farrant was scarce a man of nice observation, yet he could have sworn that my lord's eyes had for a second held a gleam of indulgence almost approaching to tenderness, as they had lighted upon the lad.

"Well met, my Lord Viscount!" cried Enguerrand, in a high, excited voice. "Aye — well met!"

If Lord Rockhurst's glance had been kindly, it was swiftly and marvellously altered. Intolerably mocking now and cold it became, to match the tone of the response:—

"Well met . . . Little Satan!"

Enguerrand had been holding his passion upon a frail leash. With a bound it now leaped. This man, by whom, at their first meeting in Whitehall, he had conceived himself, in his hypersensitive French punctilio of vanity, to have been slighted, and who had treated him from the height of his crushing superiority, who had thwarted and humiliated him, robbed him (as he held) of his sister and his preferment at one swoop — how dare he now address him in this tone of contemptuous familiarity? It was well met at last, indeed! The moment he had dreamed of, sleeping or waking, these two months was within his grasp!

"My lord," he cried still more shrilly, "his Majesty's familiar name for me, on any other lips becomes a liberty, an insolence! An insolence, sir, a liberty I will not permit!"

To his mortification he found himself trembling from head to foot. For an appreciable moment

Rockhurst ran his glance up and down the slight figure. Then he made answer; and the indifference, the placidity, of his manner was inconceivably galling:—

"True — I should not usurp his Majesty's great privileges. But, pray, let me pass, Vidame — I have business with Master Sergeant Stafford, and I am already late, I fear, for my tryst."

"Nay, milord, you shall not pass! — My lord, this is my tryst. It has been your pleasure to heap injuries on me, and on more than one score you owe me redress. We meet, at last, oh, at last! upon ground where the royal ordinance no longer stands between us. My Lord Viscount Rockhurst —" He was feverishly stripping his glove from his left hand as he spoke; but the Lord Constable, with a single gesture, swept him and his argument from the path with no more emotion than that of a man who rids himself of an importunate fly. With the same measured step he then resumed his course up the garden alley.

For a second the Vidame stood, staring after him, paralysed with rage. A faint snigger — of mingled relief and amusement — from the watcher on the bench started him to fresh action, as the prick of the spur starts the mettled horse. In a couple of leaps

he had overtaken the stately figure, and Sir Paul Farrant wheeled round to gaze after the pair, astonishment as much as prudence keeping him rooted to his place. Enguerrand dashed the glove at Lord Rockhurst's feet. The first impulse had aimed it at the face; but something stronger than himself, which the while only increased his fury, prevented the youth from offering this supreme insult to one whom years and honours and personal dignity placed apart even in the King's presence.

"My lord, you — because I am a stranger, because I am, forsooth, young enough to be your son (*à Dieu ne plaise!*), you imagine you can treat me at your will and pleasure; insult me at your mood . . . I stand, however, a man before you, my Lord Constable — with a name as good as yours. I demand my satisfaction. . . . My lord, I charge you, defend yourself!"

The young heart beat so fast, rose so high in his throat, that the words pulsed from his lips in jerks, broken with quick breaths. He drew his rapier with an almost frenzied gesture as he spoke; dashing baldrick and scabbard on one side; falling back to swing the blade with dire menace and then springing forward again, high-poised, tiptoe, only the element-

ary rules of honour keeping him from assault until his enemy should have likewise unsheathed.

A second or two, marked by the lad's panting, Lord Rockhurst fixed him through half-closed eyelids. Then, without a word, with a dexterous, irresistible, upstroke of his cane, he knocked the weapon from the fierce hand. The springy steel fell and bounded like a live thing on the flagged path, to drop again, quivering, close to Rockhurst, who, with a lightning swiftness unexpected from one of such majestic bearing, instantly clapped his foot upon it.

Then the whole precincts of the garden, it seemed, were filled with the thunder of his voice:—

"Malapert . . . !" The Lord Constable's brows were now drawn over his keen eyes in a withering frown. "This cane of mine should teach your youthship better manners were it not for this same strangerhood of yours, on which you thus presume! Aye, and you should have remembered this day, even with stripes, but that some freak of your Maker's hath given you, graceless lad as you are, Vidame, a singular look of my own gracious son. For his so sweet sake . . . thou varlet . . . I spare thee. Yet will this hour have taught thee that his Majesty's officers are not to be molested

with impunity — that the Page of the Wine Flagon can have no satisfaction to demand of the King's Lord Constable, what though his petty vanity may be a-smarting from some imagined slights. — Slights, quotha ! Young master, — there can be no slights from me to you . . . ! And for this insolence of yours to me, take you home this memento.”

With another of his startlingly sudden movements, Rockhurst stooped for the hilt of the sword that lay bent under his foot ; and snapped the blade in twain, with as much ease as one may snap a twig. Tossing the hilt back at the Vidame's feet, he went on — and it seemed that his anger had but gathered in intensity with the action :—

“Hang yonder stump of steel in your bedchamber : it may serve to remind you of a fruitful lesson learned in the Temple Gardens — how the satisfaction fit for a pert page's receiving is a sound whipping, and how you, of my mercy, escaped receiving it !”

He stepped from the broken blade, passed the boy's rigid figure so closely and indifferently as to brush him with his cloak, and set his deliberate way again toward the Temple Hall.

The Vidame stood stricken with impotent passion, sick well-nigh to swooning with the violence of his

fury in conflict with his complete helplessness; white as wax, his boyish face distorted, his eyes blood-injected, swimming in tears; a white foam at the corners of his mouth, his lips drawn back in voiceless execration. The nails of his clenched hands drove themselves into the flesh. It was not until Paul Farrant rose and laid his hand on his shoulder that the palsy was broken.

The Vidame shook the touch furiously from him. His bloodshot eyes rolled from the broken weapon on the path to the other's face, on which a malicious pleasure in his successful friend's mortification was but ill concealed by a scarcely more tolerable air of sympathy. Had it not been for the mutilation of his weapon, Paul Farrant's life's blood might well have assuaged the Frenchman's ecstasy of hatred at that moment.

Then the floodgates were loosed. Foaming, the tide of passion leaped from Enguerrand's mouth with an eloquence that betrayed his race. Usually silent, the Vidame de Joncelles, encompassed with an almost northern reserve, yet was through his mother a child of the south; and at this hour all the exuberance of the warm land, all the acrid passion that only its children can feel and which, felt, must find word expression, broke from him in torrents

of imprecations and curses, half French, half English:—

“Go thy way, then, my merry Rockhurst — go, Rakehell Rockhurst! Ha, Rakehell thou mayst be, but forget not then that I am Little Satan, and you but the servant of my Great Father! . . . Go thy way, sanctimonious hypocrite, you of the grave face and grey-sprinkled hair, hoary in corruption! You, put me out of your path . . . ! My hour will come, my hour will come, my hour will come! Faugh! I spit at thee; my clean blade was too fair for thee, thou coward, thou bully, hiding behind thy state and thy years . . . ! And that prate of paternity! I, like thy son? . . . Had I within my veins a drop of thy coward, hateful blood, I’d drain them and die laughing that I was rid of thee! Look at the great man . . . ! Look! Watch the reverend seigneur! See how yonder wretches make way for my Lord Constable!— My Lord Coward! . . . Look you, Sir Paul, is it not an admirable spectacle? The King’s friend, the mighty in council, the example to the Court! Hi, my Lord Rockhurst — Hi, thou pattern of nobility — what of my sister, what of Jeanne de Mantes? . . . And afraid to fight the brother! Look, look, friends! Ha, he’s old enough to be my father, and my sister

— 'tis his boast ! I, like his son, forsooth ? And my sister has but a year of life more than mine ! O, *que l'âge a ses privilèges !* Oh, how that paternal heart beats to high thoughts ! Curse thee, burn thee, drown thee . . . coward ! ”

Stragglers in the garden, attracted by the wild clamours, had now begun to gather. Up the slimy steps, from the 'Friars, like obscene beasts venturing furtively from their lairs, the frowzy, arrogant heads of thieving bullies, — “Knights of the Posts” and “Copper Captains,” — scenting a profitable quarrel, began to emerge. And these were shadowed by dismal shapes of womanhood, such as in those haunts were never far from the scenes of strife, like to the hovering carrion bird.

The Vidame, in his paroxysm, cared as little whether his words were flung to the solitary winds or to a thousand listeners. As the Lord Constable's cloaked figure disappeared altogether from view under the Hall archway of the Inner Temple, the boy's outburst culminated in an almost eastern flight of malediction : —

“May your shadow bring a blight wherever it falls . . . ! May your loves, your hopes, your desires be bitter as ashes . . . ! May your own flesh and blood turn against you ! May you blast

the life of your own son till he wishes he had never been born! Curse you . . . ! May your own flesh and blood curse you! May you want and never get — seek and never find! May your pillow be haunted and your waking a horror! May your wine-cup poison you and the pest follow you and break out under your footsteps! May fire consume your pride and your hair grow white in misery, in dishonour, and then may Death be deaf to your call—!”

He fell back against a tree, breath failing on his lips; flung one arm against the bole and rested his brow upon it. Then the tears which his fire of rage had burned from his eyelids threatened to overwhelm him in the weakness that follows on all such unnatural paroxysms.

Sir Paul Farrant stood a moment, dubious. He glanced from the figure against the lime tree to the dingy rabble that were drawing ever closer in grinning curiosity and unholy expectation. — In sooth (was the thought gathering strength in his mind) the little new star of Court favour seemed like to be quenched! Yonder was the lucky youth (to dare to beard the Lord Constable. . . . It had been safer, almost, to have affronted the King!) broken by a mere twist of that strong hand!

A couple of Templars, grave-looking young men,

had halted a few paces away; and now, with a low-voiced murmur to one another and an angry glance of scorn flung at the gentry that the clamour had gathered from below the steps into their trim gardens, they passed on their way.

Farrant was quick to read the omen. Henceforth, it seemed, Enguerrand de Joncelles, the King's favourite, would have to seek associates in such doubtful and dangerous company rather than among gentlemen of standing who had a care for their reputation and advancement.—The sprightly Vidame . . . threatened with a whipping—aha!

So Sir Paul replaced his beaver with a hasty gesture and, cautiously treading, took path across the turf toward the water-gate, where he reckoned to find his skiff in waiting. The while his friend wept corrosive tears against the bark of the lime tree.

The "Brothers of the Huff," the Daughters of Joy, and other good companions of Alsatia, who had awaited, expecting sport, glanced at each other in disappointment. Upon the disappearance of the Templars, one of their number made a dash for the silver hilt on the ground; closely hustled by a second, swift to perceive the intention. This latter had to be content, however, with the broken

blade, and a scuffle would have ensued had not a burly personage, who seemed to have authority among them, put an end to the dispute by possessing himself of the spoils and hustling the others back to the stairway.

A girl in tawdry finery now tripped stealthily toward the young man, who was so completely lost in the abstraction of his misery to all his surroundings, that he never felt the nimble touch that drew from his pocket the laced handkerchief, nor woke to actuality until her screech of laughter rang into his ears.

Here another woman sprang from the watchful group at the head of the stairs and flung herself between the pilferer and the Vidame, as he stood staring, white-faced and shaken.

"As for you," cried she, "march!"

The outflung gesture that accompanied the words seemed to cow the thieving strumpet.

As the girl slunk away, cursing "French Joan and her tantrums," yet in evident awe of her, the newcomer put forth her hand and touched the Vidame's wrist.

Looking at her, dazed, he recognised Laperrière's black-browed sister: a strange, sinister figure of uncertain age, and with sullen remains of what

must have been great beauty, who was wont to sit moodily stitching in the little antechamber to the fencing master's room. She had never a word for him as he passed daily to and fro, but a long, deep look: the same look was now plunging into his eyes. Having gained his attention, she dropped her hand from his and, folding her arms with a gesture of some dignity, began, in French, low-voiced and rapid: —

“Hate! Hatred! Oh, *la haine* . . . ! I have known it, my young lord! But nothing my brother can teach or do will help you here! What use is the sword and the skill of it against him who will not fight?”

Enguerrand stared at her. Then into his fixed glance of despair sprang a sudden kindling flash, in response to the strong, devouring gaze that still held his.

“You cursed too loud, *mon joli seigneur*. Oh, too loud . . . ! When one wants revenge, one must be silent!”

“Revenge . . . !” echoed Enguerrand, with such a cry as a despairing lover might give as he echoed his mistress's call.

“Hush!” said she whom Alsatia called French Joan, two brown fingers on her lips.

She bent forward, lowering her voice still more, although the mocking rabble that pressed about them, only kept at bay by her hard and watchful eyes, could have made nothing of her foreign speech:—

“Yet you spoke well,” she went on. “‘May the wine-cup poison you!—May the pest follow you and break out under your footsteps . . . !’ A man may find that in his cup which will give him quick passage . . . as quick and quicker than the pest, believe me. He might have drunk, and the wine have lain as pleasant on his tongue as ever; and, lo!—before he can call for his second draught the pest, it seems, has stilled his heart—or so will every one say in these days: swooning, mortal sweat and burning fire, death, all within the hour. . . . The pest, indeed, all who had seen it would swear. Not a sign lacking: except that it strikes so quick, so quick—no time for remedies! And yet ’tis not the pest. It holds within a small thimble. *He, mon joli seigneur*. A treasure for those who understand hate. My brother brought back his best sword-passes from Italy—I brought back better . . . the *acquetta* . . . eh, my pretty lord? The *Tofana* drops, for them you hate . . . ! You may trust me . . .

they have been tried: else, maybe, we should not be here . . . and your luck would thereby be the less. If fate gave you the chance of mixing such a cup for the one you curse, what would you give to fate?"

"All I possess," whispered the Vidame, hotly. "Anything she asked!"

Again the deep, inscrutable eyes brooded upon him. Then French Joan showed her white teeth in a smile that gave a kind of lurid beauty to her dark face.

"Well, we shall see," she said; "maybe I shall ask much, maybe I shall ask little. . . . Give me your hand, my pretty gentleman," she cried, raising her voice into sonorousness again, and speaking in broken English: "I will lead you back to my brother's. I have a cordial for such weakness. — Lean on me!"

Jeers and shouts responded from the greasy steps.

"Lean on French Joan, Master Frenchman! French Joan has a cordial for weak gentlemen!"

"Marry!" cried the girl who had stolen the kerchief, "will he come out alive again, think ye, masters?"

"Rather him than me, with French Joan!" roared the youngest ruffler, clapping his arms around her waist.

II

THE VENETIAN GLASS

“LITTLE SATAN,” said Charles, “a plague on all women, I say!”

The King’s page started from the gloomy mûse in which he had been gazing out of the window recess of the royal room in Whitehall, at the flowing tide below.

“Amen — your Majesty!” he answered, with an attempt at sprightliness, the impotence of which brought a frown to the discontented face turned upon him. “As the times go, your Majesty’s wish carries the charm of possibility. . . . If all one hears be true, the plague hath taken already not a few — ”

“Little Satan,” said the King, “many sins can be pardoned to your infernal reputation; but there is one, Odd’s fish! unforgivable. . . . You are growing monstrous dull, you are tedious. You lack tact, too, by the Lord! Fie, is it page’s business to put his master in mind of what he had better forget? —

The veriest young cit would know better than to prate in our ears of what they would fain be deaf to. . . . Gadzooks, little boy, did we pick you out, think you, French and pert and joyous, for our Page of the Bottle, that you might ape our long-faced puritan ways and go mooning about our person, clapping your hand to your heart, sighing like furnace or lover?"

Here a chuckle shook the long, lazy figure sunk in the Flemish chair.

"Is it love? Marry, it can be but love! Little Satan in love!" cried the King, avid, in the deep weariness of his existence, for the slightest pretence of amusement. "Come, confess — Dan Cupid has shot his arrow into that sulphureous young heart of thine! My little devil's in love — and being in love, has been as dull company, these three weeks, as any angel that ever flapped wings."

The Vidame had left the window recess and now stood before the King. His hand had indeed gone to his heart, with what seemed an habitual gesture. He dropped it by his side and hung his head; a dull colour crept into his cheeks and faded again. Never burdened with any superfluity of flesh, he yet had grown noticeably thin these three weeks, and the healthy pallor of his face had been replaced

by feverish tints as of one wasted by haunting, unsatisfied fires.

His royal master surveyed him, half irritably, half concernedly: —

“Come, little Enguerrand — the name of the cruel, the obdurate one?”

The page again arrested with a jerk the involuntary motion of his hand to his breast, flung back his head and suddenly laughed.

“Your Majesty, she is beautiful, if dark; and I believe that I shall kiss her on the lips before long.”

But Charles, though the most easy-going of monarchs, could rebuke undue liberty by a mere up-raising of one heavy eyebrow. This sign of displeasure and the silence with which he received his page's seemingly pert answer brought the blood leaping again into Enguerrand's wasted cheek. If he could hate, this passionate youth, he could also love; and he loved Charles with an intensity only second to his hatred for the Lord Constable. He shook his curls over his face to hide his confusion.

Charles yawned and sank a fraction lower in his great chair. For a man who demanded but one thing of life,—that it should run even,—fate was playing him sorry tricks these days. Sickness and discontent were growing apace in the kingdom,

money difficulties were pressing increasingly upon him, the progress of the war was doubtful, the quarrels of the Stewart and the Castlemaine made Whitehall a place of vast discomfort; and, besides, there were the interlacing circles of intrigue spun about him by consort, children, brother, ministers, divines, ruined loyalists, aspiring mistresses.

“Odd’s fish! Little Satan,” he resumed, good-humoured even in his exacerbation, “can you not consult your Great Father and find me an hour’s diversion?”

“Will your Majesty be pleased to survey the present of Venetian glass sent by his Majesty of France? — The chandelier has been suspended from the ceiling of the small supper room, the great mirror hung upon the wall, and the drinking vessels laid out on the buffet — according to your Majesty’s order. I saw it done this morning.”

“Pshaw!” said the King.

When these instructions had been given, he had planned a discreet party in the newly adorned chamber. But, two had heard of an invitation that one only had received. And the royal temper was still smarting from the consequent recriminations. He thought back on the distasteful scene, now, with renewed injury: —

"Gad, I'll banish the petticoats . . . though, by the Mass, the periwigs are little better! I shall have Buckingham drawing on Hamilton for the privilege of annexing my Venetian glass!" He chuckled bitterly at the sense of his own too easy good nature. "I trust they've nailed the mirror fast," he cried aloud; "I am told it is mighty fine."

Yet there was one of his chosen companions who had never sought for either advancement or booty, and who had a humour that fitted well with his own in these moods of reaction, when the voluptuary yielded to cynical melancholy.

"Why," exclaimed Charles, suddenly lifting himself in his seat with an animation he had not hitherto shown, "it is a week or more since I have seen my 'Merry Rockhurst.' Get you to the Tower, Little Satan, as fast as your black wings can carry you. Bid my Lord Constable to the rescue. Tell him I am dull, *que je m'ennuie, Vidame, et qu'il vienne s'ennuyer avec moi*, for I am persuaded he is as dull as I am. 'Tis the fate of good wit in a weary world. How now — not gone?"

"Sire," said the lad, in a toneless voice, "Lord Rockhurst is at Whitehall. I saw him at his writing

but just now, as I passed the window of his apartment."

"All the better fortune! Haste, then," said the King. "But hark ye, Little Satan: Rockhurst alone! God forbid there should be a flounce near our presence to-night! Bid the Lord Constable come and crack a bottle with us as in the old days of Flanders."

A rueful grin spread over his saturnine countenance. Castlemaine and Stewart had been overmuch for him this morning in their division: united, against a new rival — no, the thought was beyond the pale of contemplation!

Once outside, in the great corridor, filled already with evening gloom, Enguerrand paused:—

"Bid the Lord Constable come and crack a bottle with us . . . !" The boy flung back his head and breathed sharply, through dilated nostrils, as if scenting ecstasy. His moment,—so long brooded upon, desired with such acrid ardour,—was it at last within his grasp? His hand went up to his breast with that gesture that had attracted the King's notice. Aye, there it lay over his heart, the tiny phial of French Joan! Day and night he felt it, burning, biting into his soul; day and night he heard it whispering, urging, at once tormenting and delight-

ing. Since that horrible hour in the Temple Gardens, it was all he had left to look for in the world. His life, shamed in his own eyes, was a worthless thing. That other life once swept away, nothing would matter that could befall him, be it death or disgrace. He went to sleep every night holding the phial against his heart. . . . His Vengeance, dark and beautiful . . . ! as the lover holds his lady's guerdon. The moment, was it actually drawing at hand when he was to kiss her on the lips?

He gave a sudden laugh — secret-sounding yet triumphant, the abandoned laugh of the madman over his obsession — which startled a sleeping page at the end of the passage as with a sense of terror in the air, and he set off running on his errand, past the astonished servants.

When he reached the Lord Constable's Whitehall apartment, by the Holbein gateway, his lordship was still sitting at his table in the dusk, apparently absorbed in some deep revery; so deep indeed that he stared at Enguerrand with unseeing eyes. The white-haired servant had twice to repeat the announcement: "The King's page, my lord, with a command from his Majesty," before his master roused himself to attention. Then the Lord Constable

turned his fine head questioningly toward the messenger.

Enguerrand bowed low, tasting, in a kind of inner intoxication, the full sense of his own irony:—

"His Majesty bids you to supper, my lord, to crack—these are his Majesty's own words—a bottle of Rhenish, as in the old days of Flanders. His Majesty is melancholy and—commands that you come and be melancholy with him."

The faintest shadow of a smile passed over the grave, listening countenance. Any one who once came under the gaze of those brilliant, haunting eyes of the Lord Constable's could well conceive that such an order was of easy obedience. He sat in melancholy, as his royal master sat in tedium: hence the subtle pleasantry of 'my Merry Rockhurst.'

"Thank you, Vidame," said he, half rising, with a formal inclination of the head. "Inform his Majesty, if you please, that I attend instantly."

The French boy had to pause outside the gateway door, to battle with the suffocating rage that suddenly invaded him. Rather would he have received fresh insults from his enemy than this perfect courtesy—a courtesy which at once seemed to remember and to pass over. In that last glance that rested upon him, in that deep, brooding look, there had almost lurked

(or so he thought) pity. Pity! Enguerrand tore open the ruffle at his throat and gasped for breath.

Then, as swiftly as it had come, the paroxysm passed. Weakling, to waste his energies on fruitless curses! Was not his hour nigh, and did he not need the cool head, the steady hand, the quick eye? . . . He once had offered his honour and his sword for a chivalrous test . . . they both had been broken and cast from him. . . . Vastly well! Now would he pass the secret thrust for which there is no parry! He fastened his ruffle again with fingers that now scarcely trembled. And, as he ran back to the royal apartment, he broke shrilly into a stave of song: that same *frondeur* lilt that had tickled the royal ears from Sister Jeanne's lips on yonder night when she had met fortune and jilted her—at the King's supper party:—

*“La Tour, prends garde, la Tour, prends garde,
De te laisser abattre . . . !”*

rose the high notes.

“Master Page,” said a yeoman sternly, “have you taken leave of your wits? The King is within . . .”

“I know, I know,” said Enguerrand, poisoning himself for a moment on one springing foot, and looking back over his shoulder like some light Mercury

in satin and ringlet. "I know, good old greybeard, and 'tis I serve his Majesty's supper to-night!"

Then, as he leaped forward again, he took up the song, under his breath, this time, and in English,—

"Tower, have a care, O Tower, beware!"

Halfway down the corridor he paused once more, and once more looked back:—

"Look out for my Lord Constable of the Tower, you, Master Beefeater . . . for he sups with the King to-night!"

His laugh echoed as he disappeared in the ante-chamber.

"A murrain on these French crickets to whom his Majesty is fain to give what should belong to honest English lads!" grumbled the yeoman, as he ordered his halbert with a thud. "'Tis mercy we have such gentlemen as my Lord Constable about the person—to keep balance. And here indeed comes my noble lord."

Rockhurst halted a second beside the old yeoman. The gnarled hand that grasped the halbert had lost one finger: Rockhurst knew in what fight. Kings may forget what leal subjects have suffered for them, and ladies what lovers have sighed and served, but the captain forgets not the man who has stood in

his ranks. Rockhurst's hair was turning grey and the yeoman's was white — but they had been young together in the days of Edge Hill.

"A sultry evening, good Ashby," said the Lord Constable, with his kind, sad eyes on the rugged face that crimsoned with joy under the honour.

"Aye, my lord — aye!" muttered the yeoman in gruff tones. (For the more your Englishman's heart is touched, the gruffer rings his voice.) "There's storm brewing, or so my old wounds tell me, my lord."

"Aye, aye," — Rockhurst took up the sound, as he walked on, — "the storm keeps brewing, and our old wounds keep aching."

The veteran looked after him:—

"God save your honour!"

III

THE PHIAL OF ACQUETTA

THE bunches of wax candles were lit in the parlour reserved for the King's intimate gatherings. Across the outside vision of lowering sky and of black water, spangled with tossing lights, citron-yellow curtains were drawn.

The new Venetian chandelier sparkled with delicate opalescent tints as it hung over the supper table: there were pink roses and green leaves, amber flowers and blue, most wondrously wrought in glass upon its twisted branches. The cluster of goblets on the buffet, shot with gold, had the glow of jewels. Two cups stood out from the rest: each had a fantastic sea-horse with dragon tail for its base, supporting on its grotesque head — gaping-jawed with red-curved tongue — a bowl as fine and as miraculously coloured as a bubble. This delicate, magic array of colour and sheen was reflected in a great mirror which filled the panel of the wall behind the table.

This last of the Venice gifts was of severer art than the rest; and where it did not hold the bubble splendour repeated in its depths, it shone coldly, crystal and silver, from the dark wainscot.

Charles was momentarily lifted out of his heavy mood by amusement and curiosity.

"Marry!" he said, "if these be our cousin of France's leavings, what must be the treasure he has kept! Look up, my lord, this mirror — 'tis a curious and pretty piece, and reflects the light a hundred times more gaily than our silver and bronze. And the drinking gear yonder . . . ! The Apocalypse itself in glass!"

He strode to the side-table and laid a finger against the fair cheek of one of the goblets — then he glanced up and caught sight of his own dark visage in the new mirror. The gleam of satisfaction instantly vanished from the long and melancholy countenance.

"And gad, my lord," he cried, "if you think I shall be left as much as this little tass, within a week! Oh — there'll be one whose face will look vastly better than mine in yonder mirror; and another whose tiring-room can never be bright again without such a toy as yon!"

He turned and snapped his fingers impatiently

toward the soft-footed servants who came and went between the door and the sideboard with viands and flasks.

"Away with them, away with them! We'll sit together as in old times — eh, my merry Rockhurst? — and keep but Little Satan there to fill a cup."

"I oft waited on you, alone, in Holland and elsewhere, sire," responded the Lord Constable's deep voice.

"Aye, aye," said the King, in the same half-testy, half good-humoured manner. "But we have a demon handy to-night. Tush, man," proceeded he, flinging himself into the leathern chair and shaking out the Flemish napkin, "things are better with us, and things are worse with us; let us drink and remember — and drink and forget! Ha, my lord, we oft had neither pasty nor capon in those days — but I'll say that for thee, Harry, you were master cellarer, and you never let me lack decent wine —"

"My liege," said Rockhurst, a note of tenderness creeping in through his grave tones, "we had to pledge a great cause, and the wine had to be worthy of the cup!"

"Truly," said Charles. "I mind me of a certain yellow Rhenish: it had a smack — where you got it I never knew, Harry, but it had a smack! — The

cause, say you? Plague on your hypocritical gravity . . . ! Tush, man, we drank to black eyes and blue, to trim ankles and laughing tongues. Those were the days of that jade Lucy . . . ha, the pair of eyes! And what shall we pledge to-night?"

"Why, then, the old days, your Majesty."

"Aye — the old days, good days . . . and all the better, being past! None can say I am an ambitious sovereign—eh, my solemn Constable? I ask no more of my people than that they should never send me on my travels again. . . . 'Tis modest, patriarchal — a home-keeping sovereign! No one can accuse me of not spending my substance among my subjects!"

"Indeed and indeed, no, sire!" said Rockhurst, without the slightest twinkle in his straight look. "As for spending, my liege, your Majesty has indeed a royal mastery of the art."

"Go to!" said the King. "Wet that too dry humour of thine with a draught.—Nay, Little Satan, none of your dark-liveried claret to-night; we'll have the merry yellow wine in yonder long flagon. Away with this dull glass, too.—Go, play with the Apocalypse. Those dragon beakers, I'll swear they'll hold half the flagon apiece.—And you shall

have a brimmer and drink it to the last drop, my Lord Constable, for if I'm never to have you a merry dog again, by the Lord, I'll have you a drunk one! — Vidame, I say you shall see my reverend Lord Constable drunk, and have something to laugh at to your dying day — for 'tis then the solemnest villain that ever staggered on human legs."

Enguerrand had been a presence in the room as noiseless as a spirit. Yet every word that passed between the two men — the sovereign and his old comrade — had added intensity to his murderous passion. The boy loved the King. Unhappy, abnormal creature! He could neither love nor hate in reason, was as much racked with jealousy of his master's regard as a lover of his mistress's favour. Every look of old familiar friendship that Charles flung at Lord Rockhurst, every easy word, proclaiming a sympathy and confidence that placed them almost on brotherly equality, was as a lash on the raw wound of his pride — a spur to his leaping hatred.

At the King's command he filled one of the dragon beakers from the long-necked bottle with a singular precision, though his hand was cold as ice, and his pulse beat to suffocation in his throat. He set the wonderful glass — more wonderful than ever now,

with the golden liquid shining within its flanks — beside the King's plate.

"Odd's fish — a truly royal cup! As I live, the fair half of the bottle! . . . Now, boy, the other half to my Lord Constable."

Over by the sideboard, under the cold gleam of the mirror, the King's page paused a second, and his hand went a last time to his breast. Out, little phial! It lay in the hollow of his palm, no larger than a lady's thimble. Break, silken thread! His moment had come: the lover would kiss his dark mistress on the lips! There was buzzing as of a thousand angry bees in his ears. . . . He never noted how still the room had grown. Now his hand hovered over the rim of the full beaker — a strange gesture, as of the priest blessing the cup . . . !

"Little Satan . . ." said the King.

Though neither loud nor sharp, there was something so singular in Charles's voice that Rockhurst started from his wonted abstraction.

As for Enguerrand, he was struck full into his heart. Involuntarily he straightened his hand and the empty phial fell lightly on the carpet. He remained a moment staring into nothingness; then

slowly raised his eyes, and met the King's eyes in the Venetian mirror.

Charles's face in the glass . . . his glance was terrible! Terrible, too, was his voice as he spoke again, though it was lower than usual, and very distinct, very quiet:—

"Bring me that cup, Little Satan."

And as the boy mechanically lifted the dragon goblet and turned round, holding it in both hands, for it was brimming, Charles leaned across the table and passed the twin cup, his own, toward Rockhurst, who sat in wonder.

"The King should have the fuller draught," he said. "Why do you wait there, Little Satan?—Bring me that cup, that I may pledge my noble friend the Lord Constable."

With this Enguerrand heard his doom. Had the King ordered him to torture and death he could not have punished him so mortally as by this quiet order.

A second more he stood, with fascinated eyes, staring at his beloved master: there was not the faintest answer in Charles's relentless gaze. Then a dreadful smile broke on the young face. Without a word Enguerrand de Joncelles lifted the beaker to his own lips and drank.

It was a long draught, and every gulp was an effort

to the constricted throat. Yet there was no interruption; and for a seemingly endless span of silence and tension the boy stood and drew the death into himself — his eyes, over the lovely, fragile rim, fixed in agony upon the King.

Charles made no sign, but waited.

When the last drop was drained, Enguerrand unclasped his fingers on either side. The dragon glass fell and was shivered.

Here Rockhurst leaped to his feet.

"Good God, your Majesty!" he exclaimed. "What is this?"

"Sit down again," said the King, coldly. "The Vidame de Joncelles has voluntarily assumed to-night a new service about our person. It is a service which hath fallen into desuetude at the Court of England. And the young gentleman has proved a greedy taster and a clumsy one. — I am still waiting for my wine."

Rockhurst's gaze went in deep uneasiness from Charles's face, set in lines of unwonted severity, to the livid countenance of the boy, who leaned back against the sideboard, scarce able to support himself.

"Your pardon, sire," he began, pushing back his own cup — "the matter can scarce remain . . ."

But his sovereign again interrupted him, this time

with the royal peremptoriness which admits of no discussion:—

"There is but one thing we will not pardon, and it is that you add to our tedium: we commanded your presence here to-night that you might share it, not to increase it. But, meanwhile we are waiting, — Monsieur de Joncelles," — and for the first time he raised his voice sharply, — "we are waiting."

The boy passed his hand across his forehead and dashed back the curls that were already growing damp. That the King should have no pity on him, and yet spare him thus — it was befitting one whom he had worshipped from the very first for his true royalty. A kind of fierce pride awoke in him and spurred him to meet his death in a manner worthy of such clement cruelty. Though the lights were beginning to swim before his eyes and he rather groped than saw, he contrived to open a second flask and fill another of the Venetian beakers.

Then — for French Joan had been faithful, and swift was the working of her gift — he had to make a heroic effort to bring the glass to the King. But the very fierceness of the effort, final flare of an indomitable spirit, carried the failing body through.

Enguerrand came to the table with measured step, although it seemed to him he trod illimitable

air; went down slowly on one knee and uplifted his rigid hands, clasping the substance he no longer felt. The ultimate action of his life was the yielding of the cup into the King's hand.

As the King took and drank, the boy fell.

"Why, the lad has swooned . . . ! some aqua vitæ!" exclaimed Rockhurst.

But Charles flung out his hand with his rare gesture of command:—

"Nay, my lord.—He is dead, or dying. Little Satans do not do their work by halves. He is dead or soon will be.—Odd's fish!" added the King, after a moment's frowning meditation, "when you lured that linnet, his sister, to sing for you in the Tower, Harry, you little thought her song was to have such an echo!"

Rockhurst stared for a moment horror-stricken—his glance roamed from the broken beaker to the cups on the table and thence to Enguerrand's convulsed face. A glimmering of the truth began to dawn upon him; the mystery was dissolving before a tragic and dreadful light. Even in the midst of the King's words he dropped on one knee to raise the prone figure. The livid head fell limply back over his arm. The King cast one look down and averted his eyes.

"Away with him!" he cried, in an explosion of nervous irritability. "Away with him! Call whomsoever you want to carry him, do what you list, get what physician you wish,—the lad's dead, and 'tis the end of it! You understand, I'll not hear another word about the matter. . . . Gadzooks! what a finish to a tedious day! Away with him, I command you, my Lord Rockhurst!"

Rockhurst, who had half risen at the King's sharp tones, now bent once more down and gathered the inert form into his arms.

"Will your Majesty, then, open the door for me?" he said, in a low voice.

The King sprang up from his chair, dashing his napkin on one side, and flung open the door with an angry hand.

The slam of its closing echoed down the great corridors. So would Charles ever shut the unpleasant episode out from his life. Yet he had not quite succeeded: as he went moodily back to the table, his foot struck against the empty little phial. With precaution, placing the napkin between it and his palm, he held it to the light. It was wrought of Italian glass, with twisted lines of blue and red, not much larger than a filbert nut.

A vision swam before his eyes: Rockhurst's

face, upturned as he had but just now seen that of his French page; and, like it, livid in the hues of death.

“Little Satan! . . .” he said aloud.

It was the last time that the words were ever to cross his lips. He cast the phial out through the open window and heard the faint splintering crash echo from the flags below.

Rockhurst had taken but a few steps down the passage, when some inexplicable impression bade him pause and glance down at his sad burden.

The light from one of the wall sconces fell full on the boy's face: a subtle change, that was scarcely so much a quiver as a composing of all the features, was passing over it, driving away the terrible pinched look of agony and restoring something of its youthful beauty. Then Enguerrand opened his eyes and stared up into the Lord Constable's countenance. Rockhurst had never before met those eyes but that he had found hatred in them. At this supreme moment there was no hatred, only a kind of desolate wonder. Then, even as their gaze met, the soul that seemed to seek his was gone; the eyes wondered no more.

Rockhurst stood still, an intolerable pain at his

heart. It was almost as if he held his own son's dead body on his breast. The ring of the yeoman's halbert, the tramp of his heavy foot, roused him from the reverie. He strode forward a few steps more.

"Ho, Ashby," he called, "I have need of thee!"

"Nay, in God's mercy," cried the old man, drawing near, "that is never the French lad!"

He laid the halbert against the wall, and hastened to relieve his captain from the burden. Then, as he felt one of the small hands, cold and limp:—

"Dead, and dead in very surety! Why, 'tis not an hour since he passed me, singing like a swallow on the wing, and hopping for all like a squirrel."

Very serious was the face of the King's physician, and pale his cheek, as he lifted himself suddenly from the examination of the corpse that had been laid on my Lord Constable's bed, in the room by the gateway.

He turned hastily and, forgetting all decorum, pushed not only the yeoman, who was awaiting his orders, but my lord himself, from the chamber.

"We can do nothing — the boy is dead!"

Then he leaned over and breathed rather than spoke into Rockhurst's ear the single word, "Plague."

Adding aloud, the while fumbling in his pocket for his pomander box:—

“One of those monstrous, sudden cases we are told of—but which I confess I have never seen! Merciful heavens . . . in Whitehall! Your lordship must submit instantly to fumigation. Aye, and yonder yeoman, too, who carried the body.” This between prolonged sniffs at the pierced lid of his pomander box. “Pray, my lord, inhale of this, deep—and you, too, fellow, after his lordship! And the burial must be early in the morn—poor lad! And, my lord, I beseech let it be in secret. Oh, we must hold our tongues about this, my Lord Constable! The sickness in Whitehall, and in his Majesty’s very apartment! . . . Not a word to his Majesty! The lad has died of a fit—a rush to the head. Tut, tut—the truth must be kept secret indeed!”

Rockhurst had listened with immovable countenance.

“Aye,” he said gravely, “it shall be kept secret.”

And, after inhaling the pomander box with due solemnity, he handed it to yeoman Ashby. But as soon as the physician, taking a hurried *congé*, had left the anteroom, he laid his hand on the old soldier’s shoulder:—

"Never fear, man, neither you nor I shall catch the sickness whereof this poor youth died, you can take your captain's word for warrant. Nevertheless, I charge thee, speak no word, but, as the physician hath it — a rush to the head!"

Yet rumour ran abroad, as rumour will. And Sir Paul Farrant, hearing of his whilom friend's tragic death, had never a doubt that it was in those haunts of Alsatia that he had first met the distemper — and himself started off to the pure airs of Farrant Chace, where he spent a dismal month watching for symptoms.

Over the grave, in Tothill Fields, where the passionate, revengeful heart lay now in quietude, a stone was erected by the Lord Constable's order, which set forth the Vidame de Joncelle's names and titles, and recorded he had died in the flower of his age, honoured by the King's regard.

LADY CHILLINGBURGH'S LAST
CARD-PARTY



LADY CHILLINGBURGH'S LAST CARD-PARTY

I

LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS

LIONEL RATCLIFFE closed behind him the gate of the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields where he had his lodging. He crossed the road, then paused to survey the desolate scene.

The day was drawing to a close, but sullen fires of sunset were still burning low under a leaden, cloudy sky. Beneath his feet the grass was parched, the ground everywhere leprous grey. Though it was only early July, the foliage of the trees hung limp and sick-hued; there was not a flicker of life among the branches — indeed, hardly a stir anywhere in the languid atmosphere. Sky seemed to brood over earth, earth to lie paralysed, awaiting some moment of catastrophe, and heavy vapours to be fusing them together. The heat was a palpable presence. An anguished expectation caught the throat as with an actual pressure. The plague held all London in its grip.

Men can walk with fortitude under the wings of the Angel of Destruction, when the death he brings is a clean one, honourable, seemly; but this horrible Demon of Corruption that now spread its shadow over the world made its victims loathsome in each other's eyes and infected them with coward selfishness and panic fears.

The Court had gone at last, though Charles was no poltroon. Half the population was in flight along country roads; blind terror was upon most of those whom circumstances retained within the doomed circle. Among the well-to-do only three classes still lingered in the town: those whom a sense of duty kept at their post; those again who, with a strange but not unknown faculty of self-deception, chose to ignore the visitation rather than to face the appalling presence; and lastly, those few strong natures who, for purposes of their own, found it worth while to set danger at defiance.

To these last belonged Lionel Ratcliffe. Fully aware of the peril, he challenged it deliberately. He knew that those yellow vapours were the very breath of the pestilence; that the smell everywhere meeting his nostrils was that of death; that among yonder prostrate figures reclining beneath the trees many were doubtless stricken, dying, or dead. He

kept on, nevertheless, calm if wary, at a masterful gait, across the fields.

In his hand he swung a loaded cane of such proportions as almost to rival a watchman's staff — one which could keep at a distance or at one stroke lay low the sturdiest onslaught. For it was well known that many of the pest-stricken in their delirium rushed into the street to die; that the passer-by might at any moment be confronted by some miserable wretch who, seized with madness, would rise and clasp him in an embrace of hideous contagion.

As for the mumpers and rufflers, who were wont to emerge at the darkening hours in the Fields — like night-moths, no one knew where from — one glance of this gentleman's eye, not to speak of the knowing gesture of the staff hand, would have sufficed to bid even the stoutest of them pause and be wiser than to meddle.

And so Lionel Ratcliffe passed on, without undue haste, leaving the closed theatre on his left, making westward toward Arch Row. And presently, as he emerged from the shadow of the trees, he sighted the mansion that was his goal, Chillingburgh House, with its sharp roof, its coping balustrade and urns rising in relief, black against the lurid orange of the sky.

As he approached the gateway a sedan chair, escorted by a couple of armed footmen, was just depositing a lady voluminously wrapped in a silk cloak before the double flight of steps. He halted for a second to watch her begin the ascent on the right. She went slowly, as one fatigued; he swiftly entered the flagged courtyard, took the opposite side of the stairs, and reached the landing just before her.

“Madame de Mantes! . . . your servant —! Punctual to the moment!” cried he, bowed and clapped the feathered hat against his breast.

She halted on the last step and raised her handsome head slowly toward him, ignoring his hand. The light was growing dim, and the rosy folds of her hood looked grey; but even under its shadows and in spite of the rouge on her cheek he had an uncomfortable impression of her pallor.

“*Oui*,” she said tonelessly, “*me voici*.” Then, with sudden petulance, “*Ouf!* but one suffocates in this air!”

She caught at the strings of her cloak and tore them apart; the light silken thing slipped from her shoulders, but she hurried into the house as one unseeing. Ratcliffe picked up the garment alertly, and followed, just in time to offer his hand again at the foot of the

great staircase. The touch of her fingers struck chill. His first misgivings deepened; but he quickly dismissed the rising thoughts. Bah! a woman in love (what was there about this Rockhurst, curse him! that all the fair should thus run mad upon him?) — a woman hopelessly in love, and a French-woman at that! There would sure be scenes with the faithless lover, and she was even now rehearsing them in her agitated imagination. Well might her hands be cold.

“Are you ill at ease?” he whispered, with a perfunctory show of solicitude as they passed a couple of anxious-looking servants and drew closer together on the stairs.

“*Mon Dieu!* but not at all!” she mocked him irritably. “Neither ill in my ease, nor my heart, nor — oh, tranquillise yourself — nor in my head! Besides, who could be but well and happy in this merry London of yours?”

They had reached the gallery. She snapped her hand from his and dropped him a courtesy. He wondered to have thought her pale; now she seemed to him unwontedly flushed. Her heavy eyes shot fire. Appraising her critically, he approved. There were jewels at her ears and throat; her gown had the impress of French taste, and became her every beauty.

The grey-haired butler who flung open the doors of the drawing-room at her approach looked after the swaying, shimmering figure with melancholy approval.

"'Tis almost like old times, Master Lionel," he whispered, as Ratcliffe passed in, "to see a Court lady about the place again."

"Aye, from Court she is," said Lady Chillingburgh's grandson, halting on the threshold to let his gaze roam thankfully over the great white-and-gold room, which had a sense of coolness and repose about it, even on such a night. "But she had her reasons for not hasting off with the rest of them this morning."

"Eh — but they must be weighty reasons!" murmured the old servant, with a sigh.

"No doubt the lady thinks them so," said Lionel Ratcliffe, with his detached laugh. — "We are full early here, 'twould seem," he added in louder tones, advancing toward the card-table in the window before which the Frenchwoman had already taken seat.

But she disdained to cast toward him even the flutter of an eyelid. Her fingers were moving restlessly among the cards and dice.

"Zero . . . zero! *Hein?* Non-zero. Ah . . . *mal-chance!*"

The man stood over her a second or two in silence. Then sat down in his turn and faced her. His voice rang out with a kind of empty cheeriness:—

“What! to the dice already?—Nay,” here he leaned across the narrow space and whispered, “Remember, it was to play another game that I brought you here.”

She turned petulantly from him; then her eye became fixed, staring out through the unshuttered window.

“What a strange red moon is rising!” she cried. “Would to God, Monsieur Ratcliffe, you had never come to me this morning, tempting, tempting. . . . My boxes were packed: I should be now far from this pit of pestil—”

“Hush! hush!” he warned, finger on lip. “Not here! Do not forget my instructions.” Then, in his low, mock-gallant accents: “How now? Is the game, then, no longer worth the hazard?”

She caught up the dice-box again, feverishly:—

“Yes—yes. But I have no luck to-night!”

She muttered and cast. “Naught again!”

“Expect you luck at the game of chance,” quoth he, catching the dice-box from her hand, “when you are so lucky at the game of love?”

“I? I, lucky?”

“Yes,” proceeded he; “and have you not had Cupid’s best cards in your hand, since the very hour of your landing with Madame de France? First the King — King of Trumps himself, and eke the Queen. — Gad, she’d have loved you, were it but to spite the Castlemaine. — Then —”

“Tush!” she interrupted angrily. “Cards? — ’Tis not all to hold the cards — one must play them. I held them all, in truth —” she put her hand to her throat with a little choking sob. “But —”

“You threw them all down!” he laughed.

“Ah, *ciel!* — When the heart begins to take a part in this game of love, then all goes astray.”

“Aye,” repeated the man, steadily, his hard eyes upon her, “you threw your cards away — and all for love of this Rockhurst, the greatest knave in the pack.”

She turned with sudden anger:—

“Knave, sir? Sho! . . . King of you all!” Then, with equally sudden change of mood, “Oh, he *is* a villain!” she moaned, and her lip trembled upon tears.

“And so you have not seen him,” said he, altering his tone to one of elaborate sympathy, “since he returned to town, escorting to his house my fair cousin, Diana Harcourt? What — not once, after

all you have given up for him? — Faith, 'tis ungal-lant of him!"

Her elbows on the table, her chin sunk in her hands, she was now staring fiercely into his eyes.

"Your promise, sir, that I meet him here to-night? . . ."

"Nay, I can only tell you, my fair Jeanne, that he journeys hither from the Tower or Whitehall twice a day — when 'tis not thrice."

"*Mon Dieu!* . . ." she breathed between her clenched teeth.

Satisfied with the temper he had aroused in her, the man withdrew his eyes, turned sideways on his chair, and crossed his legs.

"I fear you've been too cool with him," he remarked airily. "Our 'merry Rockhurst,' as his Majesty calls him, is used to a vast deal of warmth."

"I — too cool!" She laughed hysterically. "Oh, yes, it was that, of course, with this heart and brain of mine on fire!"

"Then I fear," said Ratcliffe, on the edge of a yawn, "you've been too hot. The Lord Constable of his Majesty's Tower is a man of niceties."

"Monsieur Ratcliffe," cried Jeanne de Mantes,

beating the table with her palm and darting her head toward him like a pretty serpent, "you are the Devil!"

"And your very good friend, madam." He smiled with a charming bow. "Come, come! Smooth that fair brow. Do you doubt but you can hold your own against a mere country widow?"

She fixed him with suspicious eyes.

"Aye, and now it comes to me," she cried resentfully. "What is your motive in all this, Monsieur Ratcliffe? Not simply sympathy for me?"

"Come, come! Be calm." There was authority under his blandness. "Be calm," he repeated, "and let me whisper in your ear. — I will even trust you with my innermost thought. Diana Harcourt shall not be for my Lord Rockhurst, but for your humble servant."

"Aye," she commented, a twist of scorn upon her lips; "the lady, I was told, is passing rich."

"Even so," returned he, unmoved. "'Twould indeed be impossible to conceal aught from your perspicacity! — Now Mistress Harcourt, by an odd trick of fate, has become affianced to Harry Rockhurst, the virtuous, innocent country son of this most reprobate nobleman. The which, however, would be but a small matter (for she loves not the

green lad, mark you, nor ever will), were it not the spur to other feelings."

"I fail to follow you, sir," she said wearily.

"Nay, a moment's patience, pretty huntress, then you will come full on the scent. My Lord Rockhurst has had the singular maggot of playing a game of parental virtue with his heir. — But you are not listening."

She was pressing her temples with the tip of her fingers, as one who fights a stabbing pain. At his words, she looked up again and nodded; and he went on:—

"He has pledged himself to guard the goddess for his lad in the maze of the town. Mistress Diana has seen naught of my Lord Constable but the high-souled knight, the King Arthur of romance, and so he would fain remain in her eyes even as in those of his son; and thus he, whom the town has dubbed Rakehell Rockhurst, caught in his own springe, must go on playing the pattern of chivalry, the virtuous gentleman, the devoted father — play his part out, in fact, or else be dubbed now prince of hypocrites! Aye, and the cream of the jest is that they have fallen both so mad in love with each other, aha! that each can scarce breathe in the other's presence for the weight of the secret!"

He laughed, but she brooded darkly, nibbling at her little finger.

"And so," she said after a pause, "you count upon me to lure back my lord?"

"Aye," retorted he, with a great show of ease. "That — or else to pluck the mask of grave virtue from his face . . . in Mistress Harcourt's presence. Was it not agreed? Either course, I take it, will serve your purpose as well as mine. Why — I deemed you subtler, madam! Upon my Lord Constable's discomfiture; upon the opening of my fair prude's eyes, strikes my hour, I say. And, zounds, I take it! — Strikes your moment, too, so you know how to clutch it! Do you not see that?"

She made no answer. A meaningless laugh was on her lips; it died in a sigh. A strange feeling as of soaring and undulation had come upon her, and a splitting of her thoughts as though she were in two places at once. Her mind was wandering oddly, beyond her control, to the cool meadows of her childhood's home, to the days when she plucked daisies with her baby brother in the dew-wet grass. Lionel Ratcliffe was still speaking; she caught a word here and there. One phrase at last fixed her attention.

"'Twill go hard," he was saying, "if Lionel Ratcliffe comes not to his own to-night!"

"And Jeanne de Mantes to hers!" she cried then, in a kind of high-strained voice, rousing herself. And, falling back into her abstraction: "What a wicked mist there rises from the garden," she went on, complaining. "Aye, would I were far from here!"

"And let pious Mistress Harcourt convert my Lord Constable?"

"A plague on you!" she shrieked in a sudden frenzy.

"Hush, hush! That word — have you forgot?"

A shadow fell on them as they leaned together. She looked up in terror. It was only the old butler, with a whispered message from Lady Chillingburgh to her grandson.

Lionel frowned: the interruption was unwelcome. He glanced at the clock, it was the hour of the reception; the guests would presently arrive, and he mistrusted the Frenchwoman's tact, above all to-night, in this unwonted vapourish mood. He rose with ill humour.

"Some whimsy of my grandam about the tables, no doubt," he muttered, as he sauntered from the room, pausing at the door to cast a last look of warn-

ing. And, truly, — for Fate plays such tricks upon those who would guide her, — scarce had his footsteps died away, when Lord Rockhurst himself entered unannounced upon the solitary guest, as enters the familiar of the house.

II

LOVE'S REPROACH

HE reached the middle of the room before he caught sight of her: An angry frown suddenly overcast features which, in repose, were at once singularly dignified and melancholy.

"How now?" he said harshly. "How come you here?"

Whatever illusion Jeanne de Mantes might have cherished as to her power over the man she loved, that frown, the cutting tones, all too quickly dispelled it. She felt as one who, stretching her cheek for a kiss, receives a blow. Ingrate! And she who, this day, was braving death to see him once more! Quick upon the smart of pain, her fury rose. Squaring her elbows, she looked at him insolently.

"Why, in my sedan chair, milord."

"Who brought you, then?"

But she had not the strength for the fight. What had come to Jeanne de Mantes? She found herself faltering:—

“Nay, say *what* brought me, Rockhurst, and I will tell you. It was to see you.” Her voice deepened, the tears she would not shed wept in it. “I was packing, if you would know, for country and safety, even this morning. And when Mr. Ratcliffe told me —”

“Ha!” he interrupted, speaking half to himself, “I might have known who had baited this trap.”

She went on with rising plaint: —

“Oh! what have I done to thee, my friend —?”

“This is no place for you, madam,” he said, coming close to her and speaking very low. “A house you have no right to enter.”

The colour flamed up again to her face.

“Nay, if you are here, milord,” she retorted, “why not I, then?”

He stood a few seconds, his dark eye upon her, deeply thinking; then, as though upon a sudden, wilful mood, a complete change came over him. The stateliness, the air of command, the something unapproachable as of one set apart, gave place to mockery, to languor. He let himself sink upon the chair that Ratcliffe had vacated; and, running his fingers through the black curls that lay on his shoulders, scrutinised her again insolently through half-closed lids.

"Lionel Ratcliffe," quoth he then, "is a gentleman of birth and parts. And if he hath not much of this world's goods, he hath wits, which is nigh as good. Mightest do worse, Jinny!"

"And is it for this," cried she, laughing loudly, "that I gave up a king?" But in the midst of her laughter tears welled and ran down her cheeks.

"By the Lord Harry!" he said, wilfully hard, "but this becomes a wearisome refrain of thine! What now, Old Rowley is forgiving. Finish that packing of thine, and hie thee to Salisbury. You might still —"

She caught her kerchief from her bosom and set her teeth in it.

"Might I, indeed, my lord? Oh, you are gallant!" Then the tears came on that hysteric outburst: "You will break my heart!"

He glanced anxiously toward the door

"Tush! — Hearts?" he cried impatiently. "We are set with five senses in this world, and 'tis but common wisdom to take note of them. But hearts? What have you and I to do with hearts?"

"And, indeed," she sobbed — "and, indeed, I never knew I had one, till you had taken it from me!"

"Dry your eyes, Jinny," said he then, not unkindly. "When will ye women learn it? — tears are daggers

with which ye slay your charms. . . . Enough! I for one never could abide a salt check.”

She thrust back the sob rising in her throat, and strove to smile upon him.

“Time was you thought me handsome,” she murmured with catching breath.

“I think thee handsome still,” he answered; stretched out a languid finger and touched her chin. Then a bitter laugh shook him. “A morsel fit for a king, as I said!”

With her snakelike movement she rose, and stood a second, glaring down at him. Then to her ears came a rustle along the oaken boards of the passage. Her rival! And she, *la belle* Jeanne de Mantes, tear-stained, a hideous thing to be mocked at! Like a hunted thing, she turned and dashed through the open window out upon the terrace that overlooked the gloom of the garden.

No fresh air there to cool her fevered temples, to revive that heart so strangely labouring. But stronger than all physical discomfort was the galling interest of her jealousy. She returned close to the window by which she had fled. . . . The mischief of it was that, with this hammering of her pulses, she could scarce catch a word of what passed within

the room. But she could see! And the whole life power in her became concentrated in her burning eyes. Pshaw! it was but a pale girl when all was said and done! And the hair, positive red! . . . Aye, and overlong in the limb — an English gawk! She would call herself slender, no doubt — thin was the word for her. Not a jewel, not even a pearl, on the forehead! If Jeanne de Mantes knew milord — him so travelled, so fastidious, so *raffiné* — this dish of curds and whey would mighty soon pall upon his palate. Yet, through all this tale of her rival's disabilities, a relentless voice, far away in her soul, yet clear as judge's sentence, repeated that Diana was beautiful and held Rockhurst's love. In her despair, something like madness ran hot through her veins. Very well, at any rate, as Lionel Ratcliffe had it, her moment was at hand! A shuddering fit came over her that seemed to shake her ideas away, as an autumn wind the leaves. . . . Her moment? What moment . . . ?

In the yellow candle-light within, Lord Rockhurst had ceremoniously greeted his son's betrothed. Silently she courtesied. Then, as they drew closer to each other, the man saw traces of tears on the fair cheek.

"What is this?" he exclaimed. "You have been weeping!"

"Truly, my lord," said she, smiling, yet with a little catch in her breath, "I should be ashamed to show you this disfigured countenance."

"Disfigured?" he echoed. "Nay — transfigured!"

He took a quick step toward her as she spoke; but she drew back.

"I have a letter from Harry," she said constrainedly; and Rockhurst drew himself up, darkening.

"Aye," said he, and then approached her again, his whole manner delicately, indescribably altered. "Good news, I trust?"

"Oh, vastly," she answered, with a small, flustered laugh, drawing a folded sheet from her bosom. There was a deep pause. "I am glad to have heard from Harry," she declared of a sudden, bravely.

"So glad," he said, low-voiced, "that you wept."

"My lord!" There was fear and warning in her cry.

"Ah, Diana, do not grudge me your tears, since 'tis all I may ever have from you!" He took a hasty turn about the room, — his eyes averted, not to read in her countenance the effect of this cry of revelation. When he came back to her, iron com-

posure was once more upon him. "I, too, heard from my son. Harry clamours to be allowed to join us. That may not be. Less than ever now!" A church bell rang mournfully into his last words. "Why, hark! the very bells ring out the words, plague, plague!"

"Oh, my good lord!" she exclaimed, her finger on her lip.

"Aye, and is my Lady Chillingburgh still so mad?"

"Mad? No; but all London is gone mad, is labouring under a monstrous illusion. We, in this house, alone are sane. There never was such an ailment as the—" she dropped and formed the evil word only with a movement of the lips. "And if, as you see, our friends grow scarcer each Wednesday night, there are a thousand indifferent good reasons to explain their absence."

Something in the sweet, assumed archness of her tone stirred him as could no outburst of feminine terror.

"Diana, child, I cannot permit this! You must not remain exposed to such peril. I will no longer be withheld from speaking to Lady Chillingburgh."

"Believe me, my lord," she prayed him earnestly, "you would but anger her; you would but be ban-

ished this house, and nothing gained indeed. Oh, do not speak!"

He took both her hands as she involuntarily flung them out.

"Then will I speak to you only. Diana, think of yourself, of Harry. The whole town is in flight. The departure of the Court has given the final signal for panic —"

She smiled as she slowly withdrew her hands.

"And you, my lord, when do you join the fugitives?"

"I?" He started. "Why, surely, madam, you know I have a post to keep! 'Tis one I would not desert if I might. My men, poor devils, look to me —"

"Ah," she interrupted, "and have I no post to hold against the same enemy? How many servants would my grandmother retain if I set the example?"

"Diana!" The word escaped him in an uncontrollable impulse of tenderness. But he checked himself again on the very leap of passion. "Ah," he murmured, "I shall have a brave daughter!"

She smiled, as a woman smiles at the hurt inflicted by the best-beloved.

There came from without the sound of voices, uplifted in the pleasant, artificial accents that mark

the social meeting, and Lionel Ratcliffe ushered a couple of elderly visitors into the room with his elaborate, if ironic, courtesy.

"You are not the first, gentlemen, you perceive. Indeed, my worthy ancestress is somewhat behind-hand in her usual punctilio. But she has been engaged (with my assistance) in the dismissal of a saucy footman who has had the insolence to remark to her upon these red crosses with which it hath become the rage to adorn the doors of certain houses these days."

Both the men laughed uneasily.

"Tut, tut!" cried the elder and stouter, and sniffed surreptitiously at his pomander box.

"Quite so," assented Lionel, suavely.

Whereupon the other guest broke out, as in anger: —

"A monstrous nuisance, 'pon honour! Gad, sirs, I am here straight from a crony's house — my Lord Vernon's and no other. What think you greets me from the door-step — a nobleman's door, mark you! The cross, sir, the cross! and by my soul, the text, '*Lord have mercy on us!*' writ beneath in chalk!"

"Lord 'a' mercy!" exclaimed the stout man, starting back involuntarily. "You did not cross the threshold?"

"No, Mr. Foulkes," returned the younger severely. Then he burst forth again, a man mightily offended by the indelicacy of events: "Gad, sir, I'm not fond of the country, but I'm for it to-morrow!"

Foulkes again sniffed his spice-box, this time openly.

"Why, so am I, Sir John!—Ah, Mistress Harcourt, your humble devoted!"

Ratcliffe, who had anxiously looked round the room for Madame de Mantes, while the guests exchanged greetings, now saw her emerge from the window recess, and threw her a keen, enquiring glance. Without meeting his eyes, she came forward with a great rustle of ballooning silk so that all turned toward her.

"Pray, Mr. Ratcliffe," said she, in a gay and coquettish voice, "you have not yet presented me to your kinswoman."

Ratcliffe shot swift scrutiny from beneath his drawn brows at Diana's surprised face, at Lord Rockhurst's dark, impassive countenance and the Frenchwoman's crimson cheeks and haggard eyes, imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders, and complied:—

"Cousin Diana—Madame de Mantes, who is kind enough to add her charming presence to our

dwindling company to-night. Agreeably to our grandmother's wish, I have been acting herald to her hospitality."

Jeanne sank into the centre of her amber and blue draperies; emerged languorous, extended with queenly grace a hand to Foulkes and another to Sir John, and from the very sweep of her courtesies flung a condescending phrase at her rival: —

"Monsieur, your handsome cousin, has been so eloquent about you, madam, that 'tis almost as if I knew you already."

"He is very kind," faltered Diana, ill at ease, she scarce knew why. Then, mindful of her duty as hostess, "You know my Lord Rockhurst?"

The lady looked beyond them into the night of the garden.

"We *have* met," she said in dreamy tones, and sailed into a third obeisance.

The two gentlemen of the Court instinctively drew together.

"What has come to that pretty piece from France? Her looks are oddly altered, think you not? And her manner is somewhat singular to-night. What makes she in this prim circle? She should be at Salisbury," whispered Foulkes.

Sir John Farrington jerked his thumb knowingly

toward the Lord Constable; both looked, laughed, and wagged their heads. Rockhurst stepped forward and unostentatiously drew Diana away from Madame de Mantes. Lionel seized his moment:—

"What did you, from the room?" he whispered hurriedly in his ally's ear. "You had your chance, and let it slip! I had not brought you here—" He stopped suddenly, staring at her askance. The great enamel clasp, that held the artfully careless draperies at her breast, rose and fell with her over-quick breathing, yet her mood was strangely cheerful; nay, incomprehensible, for he marked that her eyes were red. She had wept, he angrily thought, and robbed herself well-nigh of all her beauty. "You've lost the trick for both of us," he muttered bitterly.

"Don't be too sure," she bade him, drawing closer to him. "Look at them!" she cried, tossing her curls in the direction of Rockhurst and Diana. "Ha! you'd have me believe Rockhurst in love—in love with that white, bloodless, fireless country stock! Oh, sir, I have seen Rockhurst in love!"

A smile twisted his lips; he looked at her cruelly. She proceeded with a mixture of exultation and bitterness:—

"I watched them; they thought themselves alone.

I tell you he made no attempt to do more than kiss her finger-tips! Ah, *mon Dieu!*" Her laughter was like a flame running through her. "With me — Ah, you men! do I not know you?"

"Pshaw!" said Ratcliffe, deliberately. "Something you may know of us, and know well. But you know not what a virtuous woman can make of us."

She wheeled on him, clenching her hands as though to strike him.

"Indeed!" she panted. "And have I not had as much virtue as any woman — once?" Then, finding his gaze fixed upon his cousin, she halted upon precipitate speech, watched him keenly for a second, and broke into loud laughter.

"Hush!" he cried, starting at the wanton sound.

"Excellent Lionel," she said, catching him with her small, burning fingers, "if friends are to help each other, they should be frank. But now I know your secret, I know where I am. As Heaven is good to me," her laugh rang out again, "'tis not for the money; why, 'tis for love! You're in love with the widow!"

He looked at her for an instant as if he could have stabbed her willingly, but the next fell back into his cynic mood.

"Congratulate yourself, then," he retorted drily, "since I have all the more reason to have my way. But, pray you, here comes my grandam. She cares not for such loud mirth."

"Trust me," she tittered. "I await but the ripe moment. The unmasking shall yet be played to your liking, and —" She faltered; into her eyes came the vagueness, into her voice the singular change, that once or twice already had aroused Ratcliffe's attention. In a kind of toneless whisper, rapid and jerky, she added: "Unmask? Oh, yes, milord. No doubt — after supper!"

Lionel fell back with a frown of dismay.

The folding doors were thrown apart; two footmen entered, bearing candelabra which they deposited upon the centre card-table. There was an abrupt cessation of talk among the guests, and all turned in formal expectation of the venerable hostess's entry. Into which stillness Lady Chillingburgh, seated very upright in her chair, was wheeled by a negro boy.

III

THE PLAGUE-CART

THROUGH the fantastic mists that circled in her brain to-night, now shrouding her faculties in gloom like the sinister fog that hung without, now shot as with many-coloured fires, Madame de Mantes gazed upon this extraordinary personality.

Paralysed to the waist though the old lady was, a fierce vitality, an indomitable will, looked out of the sunken black eyes, spoke in the cavernous voice, imposed itself in the gesture of the shrivelled hand. Here was one, in spite of age and infirmity, strong enough to bid defiance to universal calamity, to look Pestilence in the face, and choose to ignore it; who, in the midst of a terror akin to that of the scriptural last day — when the abomination of desolation seemed to have fallen upon the city, and he that was on the housetop might scarce come down to take anything out of his house — could still give her weekly card-party and find guests to obey the summons.

As her chair was brought to a stand in the middle of the room, Lady Chillingburgh drew her eyebrows together and swept a slow, severe glance over the circle.

"I was informed the company had assembled. How now! Are these all my guests?"

There was a kind of apologetic stir, as if each person felt responsible for the paucity of the gathering. Then Rockhurst and the other men advanced and gravely paid their devoirs. Diana drew her grandmother's chair to a more suitable position by the big card-table, and stood behind her, in attendance. Ratcliffe instantly proceeded to the introduction of the new guest. He was once more suave, to glibness:—

"The Court has left this morning, dear madam; hence this unwonted emptiness of your rooms. Nevertheless, here is a lady of the royal circle. Madame de Mantes, of the house of Madame Henriette de France, and honoured by their Majesties' particular regard — she still prefers the advantages of the town."

The aged face became wreathed in smiles.

"I trust their Majesties were in good health, madam, when last you saw them," said my Lady Chillingburgh in stately condescension.

Jeanne courtesied mechanically. She felt of a sudden childishly afraid of the figure in the chair, old, old and nearly dead, yet so alive !

The faint, hollow voice went on, as from the recesses of a tomb :—

“You play cards, of course, Madame de Mantes !” To which the other made answer feebly, into space :—

“Yes . . . yes, milady. I came to play.”

A slight shade of surprise appeared in the hostess's eyes ; but after a second, she made another gesture with the clawlike hand, and turned with an unerring precision of politeness to her friends :—

“Sir John, I rejoice to see you ; you had failed us of late. Ah, Mr. Foulkes, you indeed are ever faithful ! But where is your good lady ?”

“She deemed it wiser — hem,” Foulkes coughed, a-sweat with embarrassment, “I mean, she had accepted an invitation to the country, and left this morning with our family.”

“Indeed !” commented the venerable hostess, regally. “My Lord Rockhurst, you prefer basset, I know. So does Sir John. Will you be seated yonder ? Grandson, to my left. Madame, will you face me, if you please ? Mr. Foulkes, sir, to my right. Diana, child, shuffle the cards.”

They fell into their places as she willed them; and for a little while round the greater table there was naught but the business of the moment: the necessary words of the game, the rattle of the dice, the whisper of sliding cards. Diana, her fresh young beauty drawn close in startling contrast to her grandmother's awe-inspiring face, held the cards for the trembling fingers, flung the dice.

In the window recess, the two men, under cover of a languid contest, conversed gravely in undertones. But ever and again the Lord Constable's gaze, charged with anxiety, sought Diana's radiant head. Jeanne had flung herself feverishly into the game, which seemed to her all at once a matter of colossal importance.

"I marvel extremely," quoth Lady Chillingburgh, "that my Lord Marsham should be so late. You are acquaint with my Lord Marsham, madame? He is much at Whitehall. We are indeed a small party to-night. Let us hope my lord will presently appear."

Foulkes, who had shown increasing agitation during this speech, now dropped his cards with a muffled "Mercy be good to us!"

Ratcliffe kicked him under the table, the while addressing his bland tones to his grandmother.

"Do not expect his lordship to-night, madam. I hear he has convened a party of his own."

Sir John Farringdon, straining startled ears and eyes from the other table, caught Ratcliffe's glance, and mouthed at him with dumb lips, "Gone?" — jerking heavenward with his thumb.

"Gone," asserted Ratcliffe's nod, while his thumb pointed grimly down.

Lady Chillingburgh turned her quick glance, her high pyramid of lace and white curls, in daunting enquiry toward Sir John. But her grandson, diabolically fluent, was once more ready with his irony:—

"Sir John is offended at having received no invitation."

"'Tis very strange," said Lady Chillingburgh. "My Lord Marsham is not wont to be discourteous."

"'Twas such a sudden inspiration," soothed Lionel.

His grandmother fixed him with stern disapproval. Diana sometimes thought that, though it was the old woman's fancy to be humoured, not a jot of their elaborate pretence escaped her; that she fiercely resented the mocking manner with which Lionel acted his rôle.

"And your cousin, sir? Where lurks he? Your brother Edward, I mean, Diana?"

And as Diana had no answer but a look of dumb

distress, the old lady finished the phrase for herself:—

“I fear young Edward can find little time for the duties he owes to his grandmother, for the claims of a genteel society, so eager is he, since he is come to London, for less reputable amusements!” Again the fiery eyes wandered, seeking. “And Mistress Hill? ’Tis the first time in seven years that Mistress Hill has failed me.”

Sir John Farringdon, who had been unaccountably nettled by Ratcliffe’s mocking remark, here lifted his voice somewhat overloudly:—

“I can give tidings of Mistress Hill, madam. I happen to know that this evening she was driven out in state. No doubt, Mr. Ratcliffe, ’twas to join that gathering of my Lord Marsham’s to which, as you were good enough to inform the company, I was not asked.”

Rockhurst rose, frowning. And, laughing, not pleasantly, at his own wit, Sir John gathered the neglected stakes and slipped them into his pocket. Madame de Mantes echoed the laugh, shrilly, hysterically.

“*Mon Dieu!* How amusing you all are!” she cried, and furtively wiped her forehead, wet with unaccountably cold clamminess this sultry night.

A dark flush crept to the old hostess's bleached cheek. Desultory talk or grim jest failed alike to relieve the tension. The game languished; scarce passed a card or rang a die; the ever-shadowing Horror hung, nightmare-dark, ever closer, ever more palpable, over all.

"The game, madam! The game, gentlemen!"

But it was idle, even for the bravest spirit among her guests, to deny the invisible Presence in their midst. And when, following upon a confused rumour on the stairs, a great cry of anguish and terror was raised at the very door of the room; when, staggering and wringing his hands, a distraught youth rushed in, it was almost as if his voice was that of the unacknowledged Fear; his livid face its very countenance.

"For the Lord's sake, a cup of the plague water!"

"Brother!" cried Diana. She sprang toward him. But hastily, even roughly, Rockhurst thrust her on one side, and the boy collapsed into the nearest chair.

Whereupon Lionel, coming forward with his usual coolness, ran his fingers, with a movement the sinister significance of which most people had learned to interpret these days, under the fair curls of the bent head, feeling behind the ears.

"Pshaw — 'tis nothing! . . . Sheer poltroonery," cried he, and laughed loudly, and struck his cousin's hunched shoulders with no gentle hand. "Art a pretty fellow to come thus, bellowing like a calf, into the presence of ladies!"

"Curse it!" moaned the lad. "I have just knocked against two women carrying a coffin! They howled like sick cats." Sinking his head on his hands once more, he rocked himself backward and forward. "Oh, this wicked London! Oh, the judgment of God!"

"Edward!" cried Lady Chillingburgh imperiously. Her voice dominated the horrified whispers of Sir John and Foulkes, Madame de Mantes's hysterical cries, young Edward's obtrusive groans.

But there was a force stronger than her in her house that night. Sir John Farringdon uncereemoniously poured himself a bumper of wine, drank it hastily, his eye on the door toward which Foulkes was already uneasily edging. Madame de Mantes, who had been sobbing out inarticulate words in her own tongue, broke into babbling laughter.

Edward sprang to his feet, thrusting aside his cousin's restraining hand.

"I will speak! Grandam shall hear the truth at last! 'Tis everywhere! Every one is getting it!

Lord Marsham, ill at noon, dead at four! Mistress Hill, well yesterday, buried to-night!"

"I command you to silence, Edward!"

The quavering voice rose high, catching painfully at lost authority; the palsied hand aimed a feeble blow at the table.

"Why must we stay, because of the old woman's whimsy?" continued the boy in fury. "Zounds! I go to-night, and sister with me. D'ye hear, grandam! I'm only come here to get the travel money from you, and I'll have it. I'll go, and sister with me!"

But the aged queen was not yet dethroned. Her spirit asserted itself in a supreme effort. Life seemed to come back to her paralysed limbs; she flung out one hand in a gesture of authority; this time it scarce trembled.

"Diana, your brother is drunk. I order him to be expelled. Mr. Foulkes, the game is not concluded; resume your seat!"

She broke off. Sir John Farringdon had made a sudden unmannerly dash from the room. Foulkes stood at command with a sickly smile; but his friend's example, the open passage, were too much for him; stealthily the door closed upon his retreat.

Only by a rigid aversion of her head did Lady

Chillingburgh betray her knowledge of this double defection.

"Grandson Lionel, your cousin Edward is drunk. Conduct him, I say, from this apartment and let him be physicked. Madam, I am surprised you find amusement in such an indecorous scene. Foh! It seems truly that we shall have no cards to-night. Diana, child, take your guitar and sing for us. Sing that old sweet song of Master Herrick's. — My Lord Rockhurst, have you yet heard this new instrument?"

But the Lord Constable had followed Diana as she moved across the room to seek the guitar. They stood together a second; he saw her hand tremble over the olive-wood case.

"Nay, child, you can never sing to-night!" he whispered.

"My lord, I must — anything to soothe her. Oh, the physicians have ever warned us of the danger of agitation for her!"

"Diana!" Lady Chillingburgh's voice was weak and strained; her face seemed to have suddenly shrunk; extinct was the fire in the eyes. Yet the will still struggled. "Sing!"

Rockhurst stood behind Diana, a strong, quiet presence, watchful, comforting. She smiled at him

over her shoulder. He bent to her, and under cover of the first chords:—

“You, at least, are not afraid?” he asked.

“No, my lord.”

Lionel Ratcliffe had taken no pains to fulfil his grandmother's behest; and already she seemed to have forgotten it; but he had soothed Edward Hare after his own fashion — by a bumper of wine and a whispered promise to provide the travel money himself. Now in the lull he took a seat behind Madame de Mantes and, his eyes on Rockhurst and Diana, began in a fierce undertone:—

“Do you not see how it is with them? Why, in this evening's folly everything conspires to give them to each other. You wait the ripe moment, say you? Gad! Look there, I say: there is that other woman with the man you love — claim him now! 'Tis your last chance!”

Madame de Mantes, who, since Lady Chillingburgh's rebuke, had been sitting, her chin propped up on her hands, her curls concealing her face, turned slowly toward him. He started. For all his fortitude a shudder ran through him. — Through her mad eyes the Pestilence was looking upon him!

Diana's voice rose faint but sweet:—

*Ask me why I send you here
This sweet infant of the year?
Ask me why I send to you
This Primrose thus bepearled with dew?*

Lady Chillingburgh, with closed lids, beat time vaguely on the arm of her chair; Edward Hare pondered over his last mouthful of wine; the Frenchwoman was muttering to herself and drawing, under the shadow of the curls, restless patterns on the table with her forefinger. Lionel sat beside her, his starting eyes upon her face.

*I will whisper to your ears:
The sweets of Love are mixed with tears!*

sang Diana, in a voice that had grown firmer and clearer.

And now, so faintly at first as to be almost imperceptible, something began to mingle itself with the music. The clang of a bell struck at intervals, followed by a long, monotonous call. The sound drew ever nearer. Diana faltered, took up her song again bravely, failed once more, struck a broken note; then hand and voice fell mute. Stillness held them all within the great room, which seemed to wait doom the more inevitably for its bright lights, for its futile air of indifference and gaiety.

Through the open window, out of the darkness, gathered a heavy rumble of wheels; then again uprose the call of the bell, the cry of the hoarse voice:—

“Bring out your dead!”

In the breathless pause, Lady Chillingburgh, rising upon those feet that had been dead to motion so long, stood erect, and flung out her arm with an angry cry; and then it seemed there was naught in the big chair but a huddled heap of drapery. The Terror, petrified on young Hare's lip, broke out roaring:—

“She's dead also! Grandam's dead! The plague! She's dead of the plague!” He made one leap for the door, his screams awaking confusion in the house.

Within Lady Chillingburgh's drawing-room the drama was quickly played.

Diana bent in anguish over her grandmother, crying:—

“She has swooned! For Heaven's sake, madame, as you are a woman, give me your assistance!”

But Lionel had sprung to her side:—

“Back, Diana! Away out of this room. Our grandmother is dead.”

“The—the sickness?” she faltered, with white lips.

"The plague? Not here —" he answered her. "But there!" He flung his pointing finger toward Jeanne de Mantes, who turned her face with a crazy laugh toward them.

Diana recoiled a pace, threw out her hands as if seeking support, and Rockhurst, ever close to her, caught her in his arms as she swooned. A sudden, blind, all-encompassing fury fell upon Ratcliffe.

"Stay, my Lord Constable!" he cried fiercely, and made a spring to wrest the unconscious burden from the hated man's embrace. "Ah, Rakehell Rockhurst, not so fast!"

The table was between them. He was wrenching at his sword as he dashed round it, pushing Jeanne de Mantes aside; when, with her soft, bare arms, she clutched his throat from behind.

It was perhaps his horror of the embrace that robbed him of the power of resistance; perhaps it was the strength lent by the delirium that rendered her burning clasp irresistible. He struggled, yet was powerless. His starting eyes beheld the Lord Constable pass out of the room to the garden, bearing Diana into the night. He gathered his energy for a last shout in the hope of raising the household to his help; but the hot arms were writhing closer about him, the scented curls beat softly against his

cheek. The creature was laughing, pressing upward her disfigured face, devouring him with her mad, unseeing eyes, striving to reach his lips for the kiss of death. — And she was raving: —

“At last, O Rockhurst! . . . *O mon beau Démon!*”

He never knew how he loosed himself — that moment was blank, stamped with too deep a horror to be ever recalled.

He found himself as in a nightmare rushing blindly through the blackness of the fields, feeling as if he could never escape from that lingering touch of contamination, as if no waters could ever lave him from the taint!

It was only when he was brought to a standstill by the edge of the river, by the Essex stairs, that he realised where his frenzy was taking him, and awoke, as it were, to sanity. But it was with a trembling in every limb and a weakness that forced him to sit on the steps. The water lapped at his very feet, shivering in a little circle of light cast by the stair lantern. He dipped his hand in the dark ripple and began mechanically to lave his brow — to lave, above all, his lips.

Thought took coherent shape again. — This was

the end of his close-set plans. Madame de Mantes had failed him with a completeness it seemed that must have required Satan's own ingenuity to devise. Lord Rockhurst had not been unmasked, Diana was with him in his power, — and he, Lionel Ratcliffe (God, with what appalling reason !), was at last afraid of the plague !

BROKEN SANCTUARY

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I

THE HAVEN OF REFUGE

A RED dawn was breaking over London; through the undrawn curtains of the parlour in Lord Rockhurst's small house in Whitehall, abutting by the Holbein gateway, the first rays darted in to mingle with the dying gleam of a pair of candles that guttered in their sockets.

Chitterley — my lord's old confidential servant, who had shared with him all fortune's vicissitudes, through prosperity and peace, through war and exile, since the last reign — rose from the high-backed chair upon which he had been dozing, and stretched his stiffened limbs wearily. Muttering to himself, as old people will, he fell with sudden alacrity to replenishing (only just in time, for it was fast going out) the small cresset which burned at his hand.

“All good spirits praise the Lord! . . . Now I pray no misfortune may have happened this night!

. . . Heaven be merciful to us; these be times of terror!"

He flung a new handful of herbs upon the rekindled embers, and watched with satisfaction the column of fragrant smoke that rose circling, now blue, now white, to hang in clouds under the ceiling. "'Twas your only remedy against the tainted air," had said Dr. Garth; and Dr. Garth was the King's physician.

"Morning already — and no sign of his lordship! Had it been a year gone, now, I had got me to my bed, and ne'er a qualm. But these be no times for frolic — and e'en if they were, my lord has had little stomach for it these weeks ago."

He shook his head, moved to the window, groaning for the aches in his joints, and peered into the street, in the hope of catching at last a glimpse of his beloved master, striding down Whitehall. Dim though Chitterley's eyes might be, he would know a furlong away the swing of the tall figure, the cock of the sword under the folds of the cloak, the proud tilt of the hat. But the street was deserted.

It seemed as if the day was rising again over the stricken city but to make visible its desolation. The unwholesome mists of the night still stagnated under the reddening light; there was none of that air of rejuvenescence, of waking life-cheer, which morning

ought to bring. The stillness was not of repose, but of hopeless expectancy.

One of those street fires, which were kept burning at all cross-roads, to combat the pollution, could be seen in the distance, toward Charing Cross, smouldering fitfully, unattended, the last thin shafts of tar smoke rising straight, dismal, through the heavy air. Somewhere in the palace, behind the banquet hall, a bell rang the hour — it sounded like a knell for those that were that day to die. Presently, in this solitude, a woman's figure appeared, creeping round a corner, holding on to the walls, dragging herself painfully; the only living creature, it seemed, left besides himself in this vast city. Presently even she disappeared from the purview.

Chitterley shuddered; and muttering his haunting "Lord have mercy upon us!" drew back from the windows to go tease again the reeking herbs in the cresset, and shift needlessly my lord's chair.

"Not even a pomander could I persuade him to take with him . . . !"

He went over to extinguish the candles and stood awhile painfully musing.

There came a knock at the outer door. Hardly trusting his deaf ears, he turned to listen — everything, anything, was an added terror these days of

terror. The knock was repeated, faintly, then vehemently.

"'Tis not my lord — he hath the house key. Pray heaven this be no ill news! — Coming, coming!" he cried shrilly, as yet another summons rang.

Hardly had the door rolled back under his feeble hands when he found himself thrust on one side: a woman in low-cut dress, with dishevelled laces hanging in shreds at her shoulders, brushed past him and walked tottering into the room beyond, to sink upon the great chair.

Like an old watch-dog's, Chitterley's first thought was of his duty.

"Madam — madam!" he protested. "His lordship is not within —" Then, as she turned upon the querulous sound, and looked vacantly at him, he staggered back, "God 'a' mercy; Madam Mantes!"

An ice-cold clutch seemed to be at his heart. Madame de Mantes it certainly was, the grand French lady of the Court, whom Lord Rockhurst had many a time entertained in days (alack, how far off they seemed!) when people laughed and made merry; and among the gay she had been the gayest, among the bright and beautiful the brightest and most fair. Chitterley could remember how, in this very room, in that very chair — which they called

the King's chair, for his Majesty always sat in it when he visited, as he loved to do, his neighbour, "my Merry Rockhurst," for an hour of pleasant converse — she had sung fit to make his old heart young again.

Yet, in sooth, this was Madame de Mantes. Torn and haggard, through the strands of her uncurled hair, her glazed eyes looked at him from red and swollen lids, piteously, scarcely as if she could see. Except for a patch of rouge, her face was livid.

He thought of the figure he had seen crawling along the walls, and dread was upon him.

"How hot it is —" she complained, in a dry, whispering voice. "Fires, fires everywhere! — Give me to drink!"

The man hesitated a moment, upon the blind impulse of flight. But the long habit of fidelity was stronger even than fear of the pestilence. He took up a flask from a table, — the *en cas* after the foreign manner, awaiting the master's return, — poured out a glass of wine and tendered it to her.

"Hot? Eh — but your hand is cold, my lady!"

She drank; seemed to gain a little strength.

"Cold?" she took up the word with an inconsequent laugh. "So would you be, *mon ami*, had you been roaming the streets, for months . . . years . . .

as I have been, to-night ! You are a kind old man. The others ran from me . . . one robbed me and beat me, then he, too, ran away. . . .”

And then Chitterley marked how cruelly, in sooth, the woman had been dealt with ; her gown and bodice rent where seemingly the jewels had been snatched ; and there was blood on her neck, trickling from the torn lobe of her little ear.

“ *Mon beau Rockhurst !* ” she went on, in that loud whisper, as of one light-headed. “ I drink to you, to you.” She lifted the cup again, but stopped, catching at her throat : “ It is fire — why did you give me fire to drink ? ”

He seized the glass from her failing hand.

“ God ’a’ mercy ! you are raving, madam ! — you must . . . ”

She turned her red glance to him, then beat the air with a fierce gesture, imposing silence, and seemed to strain her ear to sounds inaudible : —

“ Oh, don’t laugh, Rockhurst, don’t laugh . . . ! Oh, if you like not a salt cheek, I can be merry — ”

Chitterley had drawn back, step by step, to the farther end of the room. Then, of a sudden, very loud and angrily, he spoke : —

“ Madam, you are ailing. You are ill. You must go home ! ”

She came back to her surroundings with a start and a cry : —

“*Mon Dieu*, where am I? Ill? Yes, I am ill! I am strangling, I can’t breathe!” She clutched at her throat with both hands, feeling for something with frantic fingers; then, with a scream that rose and seemed to circle about the silent room like some phantom bird: “*Miséricorde!* they are there! . . . *La peste!* I have the *peste* . . .”

Chitterley’s grey hair bristled on his head.

“A physician!” he cried, and turned to fly.

But, in her delirium, she was quicker than he in his senile confusedness. She caught him by the wrist with both her hands, now burning as though, indeed, she had drunk fire : —

“No! You shall not leave me! I am dying. . . . I will not die alone!” The fleeting of madness returned to her fever-wasted brain: “We are put in this world with five senses — and ’tis but common sense to pleasure them. Aye, Rockhurst . . . but when it comes to dying! . . .” Her grip relaxed; she wrung her hands. “How can such as we die? Old man, a priest, a priest!”

He felt that he would be less than man if he did not help her. Priest and physician, she should have both, — poor soul, poor soul!

He tried to make her understand him — speaking loud as to the deaf, in little words as to a child. The priest, the physician — aye, she should have them — quickly — she might trust to him. But she looked at him, uncomprehending, with eyes ever wilder. A step farther on her awful journey; she seemed already a world away from her fellow-humans.

Then, as if his meek, aged countenance, all puckered in distress, were a spectacle of unspeakable horror, she flung out both arms to ward him from her; stared round the room like a hunted thing, and, ere he could call or arrest her, had darted through the half-open door of the inner room and flung it, clapping, into the lock between them.

"My lord's own room!"

Chitterley stood a second helplessly; then came a groan from within; the sound of a heavy fall. The old man called upon Heaven and ran on his errand of mercy.

The wretched woman found herself in a darkened room, with heavy curtains closely drawn, illumined only by a dying night-lamp. She staggered toward a couch, fought for a moment vainly for breath. Then strength, and with it, mercifully, conscious-

ness, gave way; she fell face downward, clutching the silken hangings.

It seemed as if it had become suddenly broad day in that room where Chitterley had kept his night's vigil — that room, famed once in Whitehall for those gatherings of wit and beauty, convened for his Majesty's pleasure. A shaft of sunshine, yellow through the sullen mists, struck the chair where Charles had been wont to sit; where but a few moments ago had agonised one whose gay winsomeness and bird-song he had so often commended.

The vapour of Sir George Garth's sovereign remedy rose but in feeble wisp-like exhalations, ever fainter and wider apart — like to the breath of some dying thing. Occasionally a sigh, or a groan and a muffled word or two, came dully from the neighbouring room. But after a while these ceased; and the only sound to be heard was that of a blue fly, bloated and busy, circling about, emphasising the stillness, to settle ever and anon with a heavy buzz on the wine which Jeanne de Mantes had spilled from her last cup.

II

THE GOLD WHISTLE

PRESENTLY there approached, along the flags of Whitehall, the sound of steady footfalls. They mounted the steps and halted before the door; a key grated in the lock, and Lord Rockhurst led Mistress Diana Harcourt across the threshold.

She entered without a word, let herself fall in her turn like one worn out, into the King's chair, and lifted her face toward him — a face blanched indeed with the miseries of the night, its terrors, the long vigil, the weary wandering, yet full of a brave, sweet strength.

None of her serenity was reflected on Rockhurst's countenance. His face was dark as with an inner conflict; he averted his eyes as hers sought them. There was a moment's heavy silence. He broke it, at length, standing over the fireless hearth, without looking at her.

"Now that you are under my roof, Diana, I trust you will consider yourself as if already —" he hesi-

tated, and then brought out the words harshly, "as if already in your father's house. — I fear me," he went on, after a pause, "you are dead weary after our wanderings this night . . . fruitless search for shelter — the flaming cross barring us from every threshold . . . when it was not mean selfishness and childish fears that drove us to the street again! — Your brother fled basely . . ."

She interrupted, wincing under the bitterness of his accents.

"Ah, poor Ned," she pleaded; "he is but a boy. And his wits are never of the strongest. . . . In his way, he loves me. And, truly, I am glad he has escaped."

"You have a strong heart, child!"

Though the words were kind, voice and look were hard. She shivered and drooped her head.

"You are cold," he went on, with a sudden softening in his tone. "Indeed, 'tis the chill hour of the day." He glanced hastily round the room, and catching sight of the spilt wine and the soiled cup, frowned, then laughed contemptuously. "So — even old Chitterley hath forgot his duty! These, in sooth, are days of test. I will rouse him, and you shall have fire and refreshment."

She heard his tread on the stairs, the opening and

shutting of doors within the house. Quickly he came back to her.

"Aye, even my old Chitterley gone! . . ." he cried, with a bitter twist of the lip. "Neither brotherly love, nor life-long service and companionship. . . . Nay, what should still hold, these times, when no man knows the hour when his life will be withdrawn? Oh, are you human — you, Diana, who sit so still and have no woman's plaint?"

His voice broke with sudden passion. She raised her eyes and strove to smile; but the shudder of fatigue seized her.

Without another word he lifted the cresset of charcoal from its stand, blew upon the expiring glow, cast fresh fuel upon it; then, the flame once more enkindled, flung the whole on the hearth. She watched him, and gave a little feminine cry of protest as he next seized the first thing at hand, a couple of books, and tore them up ruthlessly to feed the fire.

"O, my lord!" she began, as the flame roared up the chimney. But the faint laugh died on her lips when she met his glance.

"I must leave you," he said, when he had thrown in a couple of logs. "I must leave you; it will go ill indeed, if, within the hour, I return not with coach

and horses. If I have to plead King's Service, I shall carry you out of the infection."

The door closed on him. Left alone, Diana sighed deeply. All the bright look of courage faded from her face. How harshly he had spoken! how coldly he had looked upon her — when not averting his eyes as from something troubling! . . .

Diana Harcourt, widow of twenty, bound by a freak of fate, through the merest impulse of womanly pity, to Rockhurst's young son, — so faithful a lover, so gallant a youth, — knew her heart given to Rockhurst himself! What shame — what treachery! Moments were when she thought to guess her hidden love as returned; and then she felt herself strong and proud, and took a kind of high spiritual glory in the thought of how true they both would remain to honour and plighted troth. "Loved he not honour more," as the chivalrous song had it, she would have none of his love. . . . But, to feel it in this sacred silence, in this noble self-denial, that was a kind of pain more exquisite than any joy she had ever known.

Yet moments were, again, such as this, when his formal manner, the sombreness of his gaze, smote her with distressing conjecture. Was his solicitude but

for his boy's sake, after all? Was the self-betrayal — sweet and terrible — that had so often seemed to hover on his lips, but the gallantry of the high-bred courtier? Or — worse suspicion yet! — had he read her folly, and was it but compassion that spoke in his lingering gaze?

As she sat staring dully into the fire he had kindled for her, vividly the troubled scenes of this night of catastrophe rose before her.

Her grandmother's great card-room, lit and decked as usual; the dwindled company, each with the heavy knowledge of the peril without and about stamped upon his countenance, each with his hypocrite smile for my Lady Chillingburgh, who glared upon them from out her chair, and forbade the pestilence to exist, since she would have none of it. . . .

Next, the fair French lady from the Court courtesying in her waves of amber satin, and fixing her, Diana, — aye, and the Lord Constable, too, — with such singular eyes. She recalled to mind, truly, how those fierce eyes had followed Rockhurst, and how Cousin Lionel had smiled as he watched. . . . Tush, the poor creature knew not what she was doing — was she not stricken ill and in fever? — She might well have mad eyes. . . .

It was Lionel who had brought her. Lady Chillingburgh's own grandson who had given the citadel to the enemy it had so long defied! In rapid succession the horrid events reënacted themselves in Diana's brain:—

She heard her brother screaming on the stairs, saw him break in upon them, a foolish country lad, frenzied in his panic.

She saw the frightened faces of their guests, and Lionel's ever-mocking smile—"Sheer poltroonery!"—he was saying. And ever and again she sought and found the comfort of Rockhurst's strong protective glance.

And then came the end. . . . The huddled figure in the great chair. The face of her that had had so stout a heart, conquered in death—but less piteous, less awful sight than the living face of the French madam. "*The plague is there*—" She heard Lionel's cry of warning, and then all is black about her.

And now she relived the moment when she had awakened from her swoon; darkness and silence all about her. She thought that the nightmare of the card-room had given way to some exquisite dream. . . . Rockhurst's arm was supporting her, her head rested on his shoulder, and the solitude of a sombre

night held them safe. Above their heads, outstretched tree branches swayed murmurously as the breeze stirred. She heard his heart-beats beneath her ear, and an unknown joy ran like music in her veins: life, reality, seemed thrust as far away from her as yonder flickering lights in the black distance. It seemed indeed a dream, and surely one may accept happiness in a dream! Sighing, she had yielded herself to it one moment — one moment — alas, even as she stirred, lo, it was hers no longer! Beneath her hands was fine turf, in her nostrils the scent of fading roses; she knew where she was — somewhere under the beeches of Chillingburgh House gardens. She remembered, she understood. He had snatched her, unconscious, from the danger of the infected house. And as she moved, his clasp relaxed; he spoke to her, coldly enough, she thought:—

"You are better? It is well."

. . . Then had begun their strange pilgrimage through the London streets, the long, long night. She went beside him, through the tangle of unknown, unlit ways; seeing him only ever and anon, painted as it were against the darkness by the glare of the smoky street fires in the more open spaces. In his



The huddled figure in the great chair. The face of her that had so stout a heart, conquered in death—but less piteous, less awful sight than the living face of the French madam.



white hand, the sword drawn, guarding her from the prowling thieves of the night. Inhuman wretches, to whom the stricken city's extremity was fortune's boon, slinking after them like pariah dogs . . . ! They had spoken little : mostly words of bare need. But once he had told her she was brave ; and once that she was strong indeed. . . . She had at one moment noticed a great pity in his eyes. — Ah, he need never have pitied her ; she had been happy, being with him.

She started from her heavy revery : some one was knocking at the casement.

Outside the window the lines of a man's head and shoulders, a man hatless, with disordered periwig, were silhouetted blackly against the morning light. She sprang to her feet, terror stifling the scream in her throat. She remembered the marauders that had slunk after them in the night, more to be dreaded these desperate days than pestilence itself. But it was her own name that met her ear, urgently cried : —

“Diana, open ! — 'Tis I, Lionel.”

Before the words had penetrated to sense, she had recognised the voice. Upon the impulse of her relief, she hastened to the window and flung the casement apart.

"Cousin Lionel . . . !"

But this was a Cousin Lionel she had never before known. About his livid face the dank curls hung in wild dishevelment — he, whose person had ever seemed as sedately ordered as his mind. He motioned her from him so fiercely that she fell back in fresh alarm.

"Aye, Diana," said he, answering her look, "you may well be afraid — 'tis like enough I have it! And were it not that I am here to save you from worse than plague, for the sheer love I bear you, there should be leagues between us — Stand where you are, Diana! Come not a step nearer!"

He drew himself with effort up to the window-sill, from some ledge whereon he had climbed; then, seated, he looked in upon her again; and to his pallid countenance came a ghostly semblance of the old sarcastic smile: —

"Never enquire how I tracked you. I knew that the Rakehell, who chivalrously took you from the charge of your own kin — to rescue you from the plague, forsooth! — would find no shelter for you but that of his own honourable habitation!"

"Lionel . . . !"

Sudden anger drove all fear from her. He went on: —

"You would have been safer at Chillingburgh House, once the stricken Frenchwoman gone. And so my lord knew as well as I. Our grand dame never died of the sickness, child, but of a fit of anger — and not before her time, either! But let that pass. I saw thee on the Strand, Diana, a while ago — marked thee hither and knew the trick played on thee. A-tramp the whole night, till your body and your spirit be worn out. Is't not so? And my lord . . . so tender, so protecting, so fatherly. Is't not so?"

"Lionel . . . !"

The man changed his tone: —

"Diana, 'tis but a few hundred paces to her Majesty's House of the Blue Nuns, in St. Martin's Lane, where our kinswoman, Madam Anastasia, would shelter you in honour and safety. Come forth now, from this place; 'tis worse, I tell you, than the Pest-house! I will go before thee; I can yet protect thee along the street, if I may not approach thee. . . ."

Never had Diana heard that ring of passion from his lips; even when he had pleaded for her love, there had always run an undercurrent of mockery and cynicism in the tenderest word. Truly, these days changed all men's nature. But Diana was not

swayed: she was afire at the odiousness of the slander cast on him she loved.

"I thank you, cousin," she returned coldly. "But I have placed myself under Lord Rockhurst's protection; and since you have been pleased to watch me, sir, you will have seen the Lord Constable leave this house but a few moments ago. It was in search of a coach, and it is his purpose to escort me out of the town, even this day, to my own home."

The man on the window-sill gave a fierce laugh.

"Art as simple, Diana, as thou wouldst fain make out? Dost really believe thy protector — 'tis a fine name, in sooth—will find thee that coach?"

"Not a word more!" broke in the other. She had as strong a spirit as his own. "Who should know Lord Rockhurst better than I? Ah, who has better reason to know him? If all the world were to believe evil of him, yet would I still trust him with my life."

"And is there naught you value more than life?"

"How dare you, cousin!"

"Is your good name nothing to you?" he insisted.

"How dare you!" she repeated.

"Nay, Diana, listen to me!—Shall I tell thee what's to happen? The Rakehell will return to thee in a little while, dejected, aye, heart-broken! Far

and wide, not a horse, not a coach, not a driver to be had for love or money. He has bargained, pleaded, threatened, in vain. So thou must even trust thyself to him further—to him who is as thy father . . .”

Diana started, bit her lip. The words struck her; and vehemently she thrust them from her.

“Then, Diana,” went on Ratcliffe, ever more cuttingly, “will he discover something strange in the character of his protective feelings. . . . Thou, too, will read in thine own . . . filial . . . heart. Behold, the end is not difficult to guess!”

“Oh, foul-mouthed!” cried the young widow, recoiling.

Indignation and terror mixed were in her voice. To have the veil thus torn by sacrilegious hands from the innermost shrine; the sanctuary of her tender secret thus broken! . . . Ratcliffe clutched the window-frame with both hands and thrust his face into the room, his features working again with that unwonted passion:—

“Diana—ah, Diana, for heaven’s sake, you must understand! These days, it seems, all barriers are broken down, all laws violated with impunity. And even now, even you, Diana, will surely pay the price, if you accept the protection of Rakehell Rockhurst!”

Diana swept a gesture of final scorn : —

"Begone, Lionel ! Away with you as you came ! I pity you . . . thief of men and women's good report. Alas ! cousin, do I not know what purpose you have in this slander ? Shame that these days of terror should wake you to no worthier mind !"

The man fixed her, a breathing space or two, without speaking. Had she been less incensed, she might have noted something in his look singularly belying the thoughts she imputed to him — might have seen a purpose as earnest as it was selfless.

"One word, then, and I go — Di, from the days when we were children together, I have loved thee. Dost remember how I called thee my little wife ? You'll have none of my warning now — so be it ! In a little while you'll want me, you'll call on me. I shall be near, I shall hear thee. — Stay ; here is the gold whistle you once gave me — that Easter — years ago ! You have, of course, forgotten it. I have kept it close, you see."

He hesitated a second, poising the bauble at the end of its long ribbon, frowning. Then he cast it into the room.

"Risk for risk — all is risk ! . . . My lips have not touched it since the pestilence came so nigh them. Di, hark to me, Di. When you want my

help this day, you have but to whistle, I'll hear and help. . . . I go. Yet not so far but what I can guard my own."

She stood, her head averted; her foot beating the floor, image of scornful defiance. He slipped down from his perch to the ledge and poised himself yet a second, looking in on her as when he had first appeared:—

"Thou, in the Rakehell's hands — and the world gone mad around thee . . . ! Ah, shall't whistle sooner than thou thinkest !"

She wheeled to silence him; he was gone. A bitter conflict rose in her mind as she stood staring at the blank window space. In spite of herself, the memory of his look, of the deep earnestness of his voice, began to shake her sense of security. . . . He thought he had the sickness, yet he came to warn her ! . . . Another man would have had little reck of aught but himself, with that shadow of doom spread over him. . . . Yet he hated Rockhurst — oh, how he hated him ! — and had he not all but killed Rockhurst's son for aspiring to her ? . . . With the perspicacity of his relentless love for her, he had read her secret. Reason enough, then, that he should strive to poison her mind against one whom she knew so noble. . . . Yet again, unscrupulous, dar-

ing, cruel even in his very love for her, Ratcliffe had taken piteous pains to guard her against himself. Now, he was lurking in the lanes below, for her sake, instead of hying him to the nearest physician, so urgent did he believe her danger. . . . Was there, could there be danger?

Her ear caught the sound of the key in the lock; she knew it was Rockhurst returning. On a sudden impulse she picked up the whistle and thrust it into her bodice. Her heart beat to suffocation as she heard his hand on the door.

III

NEMESIS

ROCKHURST came in slowly and stood a moment, contemplating Diana before he spoke. The bronze of his face was singularly blanched; his grave eye was alight with a threatening of fire. Then he spoke, quickly:—

“I have beaten the neighbourhood. Whitehall is as a desert, the name of the King itself an empty sound. The whole town is fled, dying or dead.” He took her hand, clasping it with a pressure so fierce as almost to draw a cry from her. “For love or money, it is impossible to obtain horse, coach, or man.”

Her fluttering heart slowed down to the dull beat of misery; she sought to draw her hand from his.

“Oh, my lord!”

Unheeding, he went on:—

“Pestilence is rushing onward like a flood—. There is no rock, no hilltop, that is not fated to be

swallowed up in time. Diana, we are as those doomed by the Deluge, who have taken refuge on the mountain only to watch the deadly waters rise and count the hours left to them !”

He broke off; she had wrenched her hands from his grasp and had shrunk away from him, covering her face. Not the dreadful import of his words frightened her, but the fire of his glance, the mad exultation of the voice that thus pronounced their doom.

“What,” he exclaimed, his tones vibrating to a tenderness more terrible still to her ears, “have I scared thee? — Brave heart, afraid at last?”

“Yes, yes — I am afraid,” she murmured behind her clasped fingers. But, even as she spoke, her strong nature reacted against the folly of weakness. She dropped her hands, drew herself proudly up and turned, looking him steadily in the eyes: —

“No, my lord, ’twas but an evil thought !”

He returned her gaze fixedly, and she saw how the blood began to rise, slow, dark, in his cheek.

“Yet, why should I say we are doomed?” he went on, under his breath. “Why should not this house be as the ark of refuge? Diana,” — the dreadful joy broke out again in eye and accent, — “have you understood how it stands with us? There is

no help for it; we are shut in together. Heaven itself has sealed the way that would divide us —”

So, it had come! That moment she had dreamt of, with a fierce abandonment to his ecstasy; that moment, the very thought of which she had prayed against with tears, as if the mere passage of its forbidden sweetness through her heart were a sin! It had come, in this bitterness, this shame, this shattering of the ideal she held so high! She moved from him without a word, let herself drop mechanically into the King's chair, and sat, her hands clasping the carven arms, staring straight before her. Rockhurst fell on his knees beside her.

“Diana, Diana — I love you! — And ah, Diana, you love me —”

She flung out her hands to push him from her, and all her wounded heart spoke in her cry: —

“Do not say it, my lord! Oh, I have so dreaded to hear you say it!”

But her very pain was triumph in his ears. As masterfully as he caught and imprisoned her hands once again, so did his passion seize and crush her woman's scruples: —

“We are alone in a dying world! Who knows if we shall see another dawn! Shall we not take the

day that is given us, make use of life while life is still ours?”

And while she looked at him, speechless, her eyes dark in the sorrowful pallor of her face, he cried in a tone that pierced to her very marrow: —

“Diana — come to my arms and teach me, let me teach thee, how sweet life can be . . . how sweet death can be!”

She had ceased to struggle against him. Her hands lay inert in his.

He put his arm about her then; and, motionless, she submitted. But the tears slowly, slowly welled to her piteous eyes. Then he drew back from her, rose and stood again, gazing at her; the exultation, the fires of ecstasy, fading from his face, and something hard, ruthless, taking their place.

“I can get a priest to wed us, in Whitehall, ere the day be an hour older,” he said, frowning upon her.

Through the tears she would not shed, her great eyes dilated upon him.

“And what will you say — what shall we say — to your son, my lord?”

Rockhurst started as if he had been struck. A masterful man, who all his life had dominated others, he bent his brows with a terrible resentment on her who dared thwart him at this supreme hour of his

will; dared lift against him the one weapon that could pierce his armour.

“You took the trust, my lord, even as I yielded my troth. . . .”

His anger broke forth, the more ruthlessly that he was, for the first time in his life, perhaps, abandoning himself to an unworthy part, a part of weakness. Broken phrases escaped his lips, contradictions lost in the irresistible logic of passion.

“My son, . . . my son? — I shall answer for myself to my son. — Nay, what account have I to render to my son! A beardless boy, shall he come between us? . . . Diana, your eyes have lied a thousand times, or you love me! . . . That promise to Harry was no promise, wrested from you, from me, because of a white face, pleading, because of a red wound! And, if he be true flesh of mine, he will have none of you, your heart being another’s. — Why, my dear,” — his voice changed, — “think you Harry will ever have his bride, will ever see his father again?”

So long as his eye flamed, as his voice harshly chid her, she felt strong. But against that note of tenderness she weakened. A sense of physical failing came over her; she thought of the moment when, in the darkness of the garden, she had awakened to find herself in his arms. . . . Perhaps, in truth,

death was very near to them. To slip from the moorings of life, on the tide of his great love — ah, he had said it; it would be sweet! She clasped her hands to her breast; but at the touch of Lionel's gold bauble, something in herself that Rockhurst's words had lulled, started into vivid life again; something that would not let her accept the easier course. If death were, even at this moment, gloating upon them, the better reason to look on it with loyal eyes. Were Harry indeed fated never to meet bride or father again, then must father and bride remain sacred in noble memory! And not because she and Rockhurst were so fain to break it, was a promise less binding a promise. One sentence of Lionel's rang in her ear: "Behold, the end is not difficult to guess" — and with it the echo of her own voice crying back to him, "Oh, foul-mouthed!"

Quickly she made her choice; and, brave in her pain, had a smile as she turned to speak.

"Once, my lord, you saved me, when I scarce knew myself in danger. To-day it is given to me to pay my debt. And I save you. Give me your arm again, kind, beloved friend, and through the hot contamination of these streets, as once through the pure snow, bring me to honourable shelter."

For a second, the unexpected check, the unlooked-

for strength of her resistance, kept him silent. Then gently, as if to an unreasonable child: —

“And to what shelter? Poor Diana!”

Her smile took something of the divine, maternal pity which lurks in every good woman’s heart for the man she loves.

“But a stone’s throw from this place, my dear lord, — her Majesty’s House of the Blue Nuns will not refuse to open its doors to me, — as, indeed, I should have minded me sooner.”

She rose, and moved steadily toward the door, striving to seem as though she had no fear of his arresting her. But before she had time to raise the latch, his clasp of iron was on her wrist.

A cry rising from the street drove them apart like a sword: —

“Father — father!”

They looked at each other with starting eyes, blanched cheeks. Then the cry rose again: —

“My lord, — my Lord Rockhurst! — father,^o are you within?”

The colour rushed back to Diana’s face; a flame of joy leaped to her eye.

“This is no spirit-call, but good human sound. Harry, honest Harry here! — Ah, my lord, in time to save us!”

The revulsion of feeling, the unconscious admission of her words, a fierce flame of insane jealousy, suddenly kindled by the glad note in her voice, broke down the last shred of Rockhurst's self-control. His passion escaped him, tigerish :—

“ By the Lord God of Heaven or the Devil Lord of Hell, thou shalt not go to him ! ”

The young voice was uplifted again without.

“ Knock once more, Robin ; I hear stirring within.”

And a lusty shout succeeded :—

“ Ho, Chitterley, 'tis I, Robin, with Master Harry Rockhurst ! ”

Rockhurst caught Diana in his arms.

“ Mine, Diana, mine, and none shall come between us ! ”

He held her for a second against his breast, and she heard the great hammering of his heart ; then she found herself thrust within a darkened room, heard the door close upon her, the shooting of a bolt. A prisoner — and darkness all about her, a strange suffocating darkness, thick with the fumes of a burnt-out lamp.

As the Lord Constable unbolted the outer door, he was met by the precipitate entrance of his son.

“Good heavens, Chitterley —” The broken words were cut short: “My lord . . . yourself in person! Thank God, thank God!”

Young Rockhurst cast himself impetuously upon his father’s breast, sobbing with excitement. The latter suffered the embrace in silence, supported the boy, as he clung to him in sudden weakness, into the room, led him to a chair. Then he stood a second in gloomy silence, staring at the young bowed figure, sitting where she had sat, his face hidden in his hands, even as hers had been. Tears! and this weakling would wed Diana! — Diana, who had not suffered hers to fall! Yet Rockhurst loved his son; and there was a strange rending pain at his heart.

Into the oppressive stillness, broken only by Harry’s catching breath, there came from the inner room a stir as of curtains wrenched apart, as of creaking casements thrust open; and next a stifled cry. Rockhurst, expecting the instant of revelation, braced himself as a man may for the meeting of his death-stroke. But nothing more was heard, save a long, sweet whistle — some call in the street, doubtless. Ah — Diana would not betray him! — Diana loved him! As if the shrill, sweet signal had roused him, Harry Rockhurst started, dashed the tears from his cheeks, and rising, seized

his father's hand to pour forth a torrent of words:—

"Alas, my lord, and how had you the heart to leave me in this ignorance of your peril? — Had not Lionel writ to me — Oh, father, never look so sternly on me! I know I have transgressed your command to remain in the country, but how could I keep away? 'Twas not in nature — Where is Diana? Oh, my God, Chillingburgh House is deserted, the doors open to the winds, the old lady abandoned, dead, stark in her chair! Where is Diana? Father — my Diana!"

His voice rose to a scream, as his father turned a terrible, set face upon him; his father, from whom he had scarce ever known but loving and joyful looks. Evil beyond words must be the tidings awaiting him. He clutched his breast with both hands.

"Harry, be a man!" cried Rockhurst, starting as he marked the livid change that spread over the young countenance. But he was too late.

"Dead?" cried the lad, and on a sudden gasped for breath. "A curse on this wound that will not heal."

He tore at the lapels of his riding-coat, reeled and fell, barely caught, into his father's arms.

"My God — I have killed my son!" Blood welled

out between Rockhurst's fingers, as he clasped the slight, inert form.

"Harry!" he cried frantically to the deaf ears, "Harry, no, she is not dead. She is not dead! You shall even see her! — Hither, Diana!"

He raised a loud call for her; then, with a groan, remembered him — the shot bolt! Had ever a man been so mad, had ever a man been so base — been so punished? He lowered the body to the ground; 'twas the old wound indeed, that wound taken in the defence of his father's honour. A light word had been spoken of him to his son — his poor country lad, who had never heard, had never known, of one in the town nicknamed the Rakehell!

Again he raised a desperate cry for help: —

"Robin, there without . . . !"

And all at once the silent, abandoned house was full of voices and footsteps — here were the white face of his own old servant; the scared chubbiness of Yorkshire Robin — and another countenance, unknown and solemn. And behold, Chitterley was saying: —

"This way, good doctor!"

When the moment holds life and death in the balance, there is no room for surprise.

"Chitterley, ha, Chitterley," cried Rockhurst.

"Water and bandages, in Heaven's name! This way, Sir Physician!—A physician by Divine mercy!"

The man of healing, who had been much occupied with his pomander, dropped it from his nostrils to stare on the unexpected scene. And Chitterley, whose dim eyes had only just become aware of his master, burst into a dismal wail:—

"My lord, fly!—Here is plague, here is death!" Then, in yet more piercing lamentation: "What! Master Harry, too! Merciful Heaven!"

"Sir," said Rockhurst to the physician, "your attention hither!"

"Truly," said the doctor, "this seems an urgent case."

He was perhaps not displeased to find, instead of the plague-stricken patient he had been summoned to attend, a clean lad a-bleeding of a sword wound. Old Chitterley ran feebly hither and thither, as father and surgeon bent together over the unconscious form. Robin stared, voiceless.

"It is an old wound, ill-healed," explained Rockhurst. "My faithful son—he fought, a month ago, one who impugned my good name—now, hearing I was in danger of the sickness, naught could keep him from me. All the way from Yorkshire . . .

and he wasted with the fever of the hurt! When I saw him I chid him." The father looked with dry eyes of agony at the physician's thoughtful face.

"The bleeding has somewhat waned," said the latter, then, without committing himself. Then, rising stiffly from his knees: "I could attend to the young gentleman better," he pursued, "were he upon a couch. May I assist your lordship —?"

He had recognised the noble Lord Constable, the King's friend, and was full of solicitude.

"Nay — I need no aid!" The father gathered his boy again into his arms. "Chitterley, unbolt the door — How now!" The old man had flung himself before his master and, with clasped hands, was motioning him desperately back. "The wretch has gone crazy!"

"Nay, my dear master, in God's name, she lies there!"

"She?"

For one mad instant Rockhurst deemed his ancient servant stood at bay before his own threatened honour. Almost he laughed in scornful anger. What recked he now of aught except this bleeding burden on his breast? Aye, and if those purple lids, sealed in such death-like peace, were to unclose, and

Harry were to behold Diana, the father knew—and was pierced as by a two-edged sword of ruth and tenderness at the thought—that yet his son would never doubt him. Chitterley was still speaking. The tale of retribution was not complete:—

“The French lady, your lordship, sick of the plague! She lies within, dying of the sickness. ’Twas for her I sought Mr. Burbage. . . .”

Rockhurst staggered, as one struck from an unexpected quarter. In haste the physician advanced, but just in time to seize the limp body from the father’s relaxing grasp. Here were strange events, enough to bewilder the ordinary, decorous man of science on his professional round! But, as times went, astonishment had no part in men’s lives. Catastrophe had ceased to shock. The Lord Constable and his servant, either or both, might be mad: few people were quite sane these days, but here was a young life hanging on a thread: enough for the moment, if skill of his could strengthen its hold. As for the creature with the plague yonder,—whoever she might be,—let her rot: ’twas only one added to the ten thousand bound to die that day! He laid the lad all his length on the floor, drew a phial of cordial from his breast, and set dazed Robin to bring him the water from the table; while Rockhurst stood

staring at Chitterley, his face more stricken than that pallid one at his feet.

The old servant, on his side, still stretched out trembling arms in barrier; it seemed as if his mind had stopped on that effort of desperate warning. At last, tonelessly, Rockhurst spoke:—

“In my room —?”

“Aye, my lord. She was dying; I could not keep her out!”

“Sick of the plague, said you?”

“Aye, your lordship.”

The father gave a terrible cry:—

“O God, Thy vengeance is greater than my sin — Diana!”

He looked down at the physician, absorbed in ineffectual efforts to recall the wandering spirit to its fair young body; and in a voice that smote even that ear, so fully seasoned to sorrow's plaint:—

“Sir — so has Heaven dealt with me this day, that if I must needs hear now that he is dead — my only son . . . 'twould be the best tidings . . . in very truth!”



THE RED DESOLATION



THE RED DESOLATION

I

THE WATCHERS

“I HAVE seen many terrible sights in my life, Master Chitterley, — none so terrible as this.”

Thus old Martin Bracy, Sergeant-Yeoman of the Tower of London, to the Lord Constable’s body-servant.

His companion flung up trembling hands for all response. As old as the sergeant — whose head had grown white in the King’s service : at home in the civil wars, abroad in Charles’s regiment of Flanders — but of less solid metal, years had stricken him harder, and he had little breath to spare after his grievous ascent to the platform of the Beauchamp Tower. And as the two now stood, side by side, looking down from the great height over the stricken city, they might have served as types, one of green old age, the other of wintry senility.

The scene outspread below them was indeed such

as to strike awe to the stoutest heart. It was the fifth of September, third day of the great fire; and nothing, it seemed, was like to arrest the spread of the red desolation until it had embraced the whole of the town.

Under the canopy of black smoke, like some monster of nightmare, the fire crouched, spread, uncoiled itself; now it clapped ragged wings of flame high into the sky, now grasped new, unexpected quarters as with a stealthily outreached claw. The wind ran lightly from the east, so that, in cruel contrast, the sky was fair blue over their heads, while to the westward horizon it spread ensanguined, overhung with lurid clouds.

“If hell itself had broken open,” said Martin Bracy, “and were vomiting yonder, methinks it would scarce show us a more affrighting picture. Often these days, Master Chitterley, I have taken to minding me again of the Crop-Heads’ sayings — and I had a surfeit of them in my days of imprisonment, forever talking of Judgment! Aye, I would have my laugh at them, then. But now it comes back to me: —

“*First the scourge of Plague; and thereafter (that is now) the scourge of Fire!*”

He mused as the aged will, speaking his thought aloud : —

“There was one Jedediah Groggins — Smite-Them-Hip-and-Thigh was the name he gave himself, but Smit'em-Grogs they used to call him (aye, and a smiter he was!) — who had charge of the jail at York, where I was caged awhile, ye wot, after Marston Moor —”

Chitterley nodded his palsied head; his faded eyes looked out with scarce a flicker of comprehension on the present vision that so impressed the soldier; but his brain was still to be stirred by memories of the past.

“Marston Moor . . . aye! 'Twas at Marston my Lord Rockhurst took the pike-push in his thigh — and he and I in hiding long days after in a burnt-out farm-house on the wolds. Scarce bite or sup had I for him. And he fretting for the death of his gallant friend, Sir Paul Farrant, killed at his side — Aye, aye, good Sir Paul —”

The sergeant's gaze was still roaming out to where the great heart of the city throbbed in agony.

“*There went up a smoke in his wrath and a fire flamed forth from his face,*” he went on. “Truly, I mind me, that was one of this Jedediah's favourite texts. Yes — I had my laugh at it then: little

thought I I should ever see it come true, as I have done these days! . . . I was young then, and made mock of such things. But, sure, the sins of this land began with the Crop-Heads themselves, when they took up arms against his sacred Majesty." He raised his hand to his velvet cap. "But they were right in this, friend Chitterley: the wrath of the Lord is an awful thing. — Hark ye at that!"

A dull explosion had rent the air. A belching column of white smoke, fringed with black, sprang up at the extremity of the fiery picture. The sergeant moved to the corner of the parapet to peer forth: —

"See yonder . . . our lads at work! Blowing up houses ahead of the fire. Aye, truly, Master Chitterley, I would his lordship had let me take the mining party to-day. But one would think — in all respect — there was a very devil in him, since this outbreak began. 'Tis ever to the hottest with him. And the men must after him, though the flames be as greedy as hell's. — 'Tis hard on a soldier," added the old campaigner, with a philosophic sigh, "to be driven to burn before his time!"

The other's clouded perception caught but the hint of danger to a beloved master.

"His lordship?" he cried; "and whither went he to-day, Sergeant?"

“Toward Bishopsgate. See, where I point; there, where ’tis like looking upon a pit of fire.”

Chitterley curved his withered hands over his eyes and strove to fix them in the direction indicated.

“God save him,” he muttered.

“Amen,” echoed Bracy earnestly, “for he carries those white hairs of his whither he would scarce have ventured his raven locks! ’Tis beyond all reason. Aye, and Master Harry with him. . . . Lord, Lord, how it doth burn!”

Bracy seated himself upon the sill of an embrasure, and drawing a stump of pipe from his pocket, proceeded to strike flint and kindle the *tabaco*, with all the old soldier’s habit of making the most of a spare hour of rest. The other remained standing; forlorn, pathetic figure enough, beaten about by the light wind that flapped the skirts of his coat against the wasted limbs and set sparse strands of white hair dancing as in mockery about his skull.

Sergeant Bracy rolled another text upon his tongue as two or three fresh explosions, closely following each other, shocked even the mighty masonry of the Tower:—

“‘*The earth shook and trembled, because He was angry with them.*’ Aye, ’twould seem to fit in singularly!—Yet, as you and I know, ’tis but our men at

work of salvage. They must even destroy to save ! — ‘There went the last house in Shoreditch !’ He made a gesture with his pipe-stem. “Ha, now the Hall falls upon itself like a house of cards ! . . . Pray Heaven none of our boys be caught beneath the dropping masonry, as was honest Corporal Tulip yestereve ! ’Tis no marvel to me, Master Chitterley,” he went on, settling himself more comfortably on his narrow seat, “that the men like not the work. Nay, were it with other than my Lord Constable, or young Harry — or one such as I am, Master Chitterley — we might well expect a show of rebellion among them. To see death, you may say, be soldier’s life, — aye, give death, lay siege, waste, burn and slay, — all in the way of glorious war, friend Chitterley, and service of King — wholesome heat of blood to keep the horrors off — But this business, there is neither glory nor plunder in it. No — no, I’ve seen sour looks and lagging feet, as much as dare be, at least, under my lord’s eye or Master Harry’s.”

“My lord — Master Harry —” repeated Chitterley, as in a kind of dream. “Do not mock me, sergeant, but there be days now when I scarce know them apart . . . remembering . . . Or rather —”

“Aye,” interrupted the soldier, good-humoured, yet impatient of the other’s maundering, “I catch

your meaning. Young Master Harry that was a boy has grown marvellous quick a man these troublous times. 'Tis his gallant father all over again as you and I knew him. And, on the other hand, my Lord Constable is changed — oh, damnably changed! An old man in one year! — Hark in your ear! 'Tis never plague horrors, nor fire horrors, that have worked on him so sorely; 'tis the mind, Master Chitterley. Trouble of the mind!"

He tapped his forehead with the pipe-stem, nodded his head, and thereafter puffed awhile in sagacious meditation.

"In faith," said Chitterley, with piteous trembling of the lip, "my dear lord's hair has grown as white as mine own."

"Ah, it is trouble changes a man," pursued the sergeant, presently. He cast a look of kindly pity at Chitterley. "And in sooth, poor soul," muttered he under his breath, "who should prove it better than yourself, who have been a doddering poor wight ever since yon fearful morning when Master Harry was like to die of his reopened wound and my lord to go mad — and plague in the very house? — Aye, aye," his voice waxed loud again, "shall I ever forget the hour when you all came back to the Tower, and none knew if the lad was not dead already? 'Twas then

the Lord Constable's hair began to turn white.” He gave a kind of sniff, his teeth clenched on the pipe, and touched Chitterley on the arm to call back his wandering attention. “I was on guard, man, the day his Majesty returned to the city (upon the subsidence of the great sickness), and I was present at the first meeting between him and the Lord Constable. *His Majesty did not know him!*”

He emphasised each word of this last remarkable statement by a separate tap of the pipe-bowl upon his open palm.

Chitterley turned troubled eyes upon him.

“His Majesty hath ever had great love for my lord,” he protested.

“He—did—not—know—him,” repeated Sergeant Bracy, scanning his words. “I was as near his Majesty as I am to you. — ‘What,’ says the King, staring, ‘this is never my merry Rockhurst?’ — ‘Always your Majesty’s devoted servant,’ says my lord, bowing that white head, ‘but your merry Rockhurst never again.’ ‘Oh, damn!’ says his Majesty. — Ho, ho, ho! I heard him with these ears!”

There was no smile on old Chitterley’s lips. It was a question whether he followed his more sturdy comrade’s gossip or whether, in the dimness of his mind, he was only aware of the pity of many things.

"Aye, in truth, and as you say," the yeoman went on after a while, "Master Harry hath changed even as much as his father. Faith, 'twas but a lad when we laid him on his bed here; he rose from it a man. Sooth, Death's a grim teacher! I've seen many a boy soldier turned to a man by a single battle. — But there's secret trouble there, too. . . . Pity that so gallant a youth should ever wear so sober a brow! Again a word in your ear, Master Chitterley: They say a lady was lost in the plague days, none knowing where or how she died — is it true?"

Chitterley drew back and flung a cunning glance at the genial, inquisitive countenance. Old? None so old yet, nor so foolish, that he would betray his master's secret!

"Aye, the plague! the plague!" he mumbled. "As you say, good sergeant — those were terrible times."

"Sho!" said the sergeant; knocked the ashes of his pipe with an irritable tap and turned his keen blue eyes out once more to the red westward glare. Even at that instant there rose from the gateway tower the blare of a trumpet, the roll of drums. The sounds caught up and repeated from different quarters.

"God be praised," said he; "'tis the party home again from the work!"

Back went the pipe into Sergeant Bracy's pocket. He drew himself from his seat ; fell, unconsciously, once more into military bearing, and made for the stairs to seek his officer. Chitterley followed, stirred into a fleeting return of energy.

II

THE TESTAMENT

THE Lord Constable halted on the first platform and flung from his head the hat with the singed plumes. His son looked at him in some anxiety: he had felt his father's hand press ever more heavily on his shoulder as they came up the winding steps. Between the ash-powdered white locks, the handsome face struck him as more than usually drawn and pallid.

"A cup of wine for his lordship, Chitterley. — Haste!" cried he.

Rockhurst staggered slightly and sank down upon a stone bench; then looked up at his son and smiled.

"'Tis but a passing giddiness. All thanks, good lad!"

Even as he spoke the smile was succeeded by a heavy sigh. Scarce twenty-two, and his boy to wear so careworn a countenance! But a year ago, before their great trouble, he had tenderly mocked the boy

for his over-youthfulness . . . ! Here was a man with sad, haunted eyes, and features set with silent endurance of pain. And all the boyhood that had been the father's delight was lost forever.

"'Tis as if the patience of God were worn out," he went on, as though speaking to himself, after a while, during which he had gazed wistfully at the distant conflagration. "Well for those who can say in their heart that no sin of theirs has cried aloud for vengeance."

And again the heavy sigh escaped his lips.

The anxiety grew deeper in Harry Rockhurst's eyes; he took the cup of wine from Chitterley's hand (half crazed his fellow-retainers deemed him, but alert enough still in all that concerned his master's service): —

"Drink, my lord," said he, "you need it. Human strength will not bear more of the work you have done to-day . . . indeed, all these days!"

But Rockhurst's eyes having fallen upon Chitterley, he beckoned him to his side before lifting the wine to his lips. Full of secret importance, the old servant hurried to him.

Harry drew back. In many ways he felt as if his father still treated him like a child; in none more than these secret interviews with Chitterley. The

Lord Constable seemed to make his servant sole confidant and instrument in the matter of some urgent and troublous private business; one which necessitated frequent absences on both sides. The secrecy pained the young man, but he bore the slight in silence; he had not been brought up to question the parental actions.

“Didst go where I bade thee?” whispered Rockhurst.

“Aye, my lord.”

“No news?”

“No news, no news!”

Rockhurst sat awhile, moodily gazing on the red of the wine. Rousing himself at last, he drank wearily, handed the empty cup to the old man and, with a wave of the hand, dismissed him. Then he sat awhile longer yet, watching his son — There were those who said that my Lord Rockhurst’s eyes could look at naught else, when his heir was by him. Harry was engaged in receiving the sergeant yeoman’s report. The father did not speak till he saw Bracy salute and withdraw. Then he lifted his voice: —

“Harry!”

The young man started, and in an instant was by his father’s side. There was something of womanly

solicitude in his air. 'Twas a vast pity (the soldiers said among themselves) to see a young man so set upon an old one! — "Clean against nature," Corporal Tulip had vowed, whose own amorous heart was now ashes beneath the ashes of the Thames Street Hall, while his sweetheart already thought of walking o' sunsets with Anspessade Strongitharm.

Rockhurst rose and placed his hand on his son's shoulder. The two looked affectionately into each other's eyes: sad men both, and deadly worn this evening hour after the fierce work of the day.

"Harry, it is borne in on me that not many days will be given us of company together thus —"

"How, my lord — would you wish me from you again?"

"Nay — this time, Harry, it will be thy father who leaves thee."

The young man started. Look and tone left no doubt of the meaning of the words.

"Ah, father," he cried, with the irritability born of keen anxiety; "if you would but listen to me! Indeed you expose yourself unduly —"

"When death threatens from without, a man may smile at it. But when death knocks from within, Harry, thrice fool who does not hearken!"

"Sir, you alarm me." Harry's voice shook. "Oh,

I have been blind ! Your white hairs, your altered demeanour, are sure signs of suffering — some hidden sickness !”

“Even so, lad. Sickness incurable ! A secret pain that gives no rest, night nor day. Nay, nay, Harry, no physician can avail, no remedy ease —”

“Ah,” exclaimed the son in bitter accents, “now I understand much. You have never given me your confidence, yet methinks I might have been as true to help you in your need, as wise in my devotion to advise, as old Chitterley. This sickness is the secret between you. ’Tis for physician or remedy that Chitterley journeys forth daily in such mystery while you toil. Can you not see, my lord, that to be shut out from your counsel has but added deeper grief to me ? And methinks that I might have proved as true to help, as wise to counsel, as yonder old man. . . . But it has always been your pleasure to treat me as a child.”

Rockhurst fixed deep eyes of melancholy on his son.

“My illness is not of the body, Harry ; it is of the mind. But the canker works, never ceasing, eats from soul to flesh.”

“You speak in riddles, sir.”

“Alas ! you shall read my riddle soon enough.

Hast ever heard — thou canst never have known it — of that sickness of the spirit which is called . . . remorse? In sooth, 'tis uglier than the pestilence."

At the look of sudden fear his son cast upon him the Lord Constable laughed, — a laugh sadder than tears.

"Sit you down with me, Harry, and listen; for I have much to tell you, and it is, as I said, borne in upon me that it must be told now."

The young man obeyed in silence; but for a moment or two neither spoke.

The western sky before them had become an image of flaming immensity, almost beyond the power of realisation. Glow of sunset mingled with glow of fire and painted the volutes of smoke massed on the horizon with every shade of fierce magnificence and lurid threat.

"'Twould seem as if the whole town were doomed," muttered Rockhurst at last.

"The powers of hell let loose upon us," said his son, gloomily.

"Say, rather, my son, the wrath of God! Look at me, lad! The last time, perchance, that you will look upon your father's face with love and reverence."

Words froze on the young man's lips. The Lord

Constable folded his arms; his voice grew stern, ironic: —

“You believe me — do you not? — a sober, godly gentleman, as true to his duty as Christian as he has been to his king as subject —”

“Indeed, my lord, I know you as such,” quickly interrupted Harry, in deep offence.

“Aye, Harry, aye,” laughed Rockhurst, bitterly, “I had but one part to act toward thee, and it seems I did it well! — I never let thee know but the father in me, the stern yet loving father.” His voice suddenly broke on a note of tenderness. “Nay, never doubt that, whatever else you may come to doubt: I loved you well. You were my delight — My son, you’ve had a sore heart against me many a time for that I treated you, in sooth, as a child, kept you far from me, in the country; that I so sternly forbade you the town and the life of the Court. Even now you have the plaint that you are excluded from my counsel. Well, such as I planned, I have made thee. Where I have failed in life, thou art strong. Thou hast kept thy manhood pure and clean, where thy father rioted, wasted —”

“Gracious heavens! my lord! What words are these?”

“Ah, ’tis not the sound man that praises the glory

of health, but the sick. Not the sober Christian sees the full radiance of the jewel of purity, but the libertine. I never let thee guess that here, in this town, now dissolving in fire, I had won me the name of Rakehell Rockhurst.”

With paling cheek and a starting eye, the son had listened. Now he winced as if his father had struck him.

“Rakehell Rockhurst — Rakehell! And I smote Lionel Ratcliffe on the mouth for daring to couple the name to yours —!” Then, on a fierce revulsion of feeling, he caught the pale hand close to him and kissed it passionately. “Wherefore tell me this? Father, as I have ever known you, so must I ever love and honour you.”

“The Rakehell —” repeated the Lord Constable; and once more, out of the very pain of his avowal, came harshness into his tone — “that was my name in men’s mouths. His Majesty had another, a kinder one, for me; he called me in jest his merry Rockhurst. You have been reared in ripe veneration of the King’s Grace; yet, had you known life by my side (as once you yearned), you would have learned that the one name and the other meant, in Whitehall, at least, the same thing. Rakehell — aye, I may have had black perdition in my heart many a

time; yet believe this, Harry, that when like Lucifer I fell, I sinned like Lucifer with pride, arrogance, recklessness, what you will — never with baseness. Merry, my good liege called me. To find me so mad, yet see me wear so grave a face, it gave him a spur to laughter. Merry? Nay; he loved me, in chief, because in his sad heart he knew mine. Both sad hearts, sickened of life. Forever striving to find a blossom in the dust, a jest in the weary round, to taste of a fruit that was not ashes on the tongue. And there you have the secret of my life and his. . . . Then came Diana.”

“Ah, hush, my lord!” Harry rose from his seat, in violent agitation, and stood a second, pressing his hands against his breast. “With me, you know, wounds heal slowly,” he went on, striving to speak calmly. “Do not touch upon that hurt, lest the bleeding begin afresh.”

The father rose, too, followed his son to the parapet, and, again laying a hand upon his shoulder, compelled his attention. The splendour of the sunset pageant had faded, and with it all beauty from the sky. Only the glow, the gloom, the belching smoke remained.

“I knew her ere ever you did,” said the Lord Constable, his eye fixed as upon an inner vision, fair

and fresh and pure. “Aye, you never knew it. She spoke not of it again, nor did I; for you had come between us! . . . She entered into my life one winter’s night; and across the snow I set her again on her sheltered way, knowing what I was — and seeing what she was. But from the instant of our parting (’twas all in the snow, lad, and above us a sky of stars; scarce I touched her hand; not a word exchanged but a God be wi’ ye), from that instant she was never from my thoughts — She, the might-have-been, the one woman for me! Aye, you stare, your grave father! Your old father! I was a strong man, then, and life ran potent in my veins. Dost remember how I met her again, in the Peacock Walk at home, and you prating of your love for her, with beardless lip?”

“Oh, father, father, father!” cried the poor lad. “For God’s sake! . . . You are all I have left!”

“Hush! Look on these white hairs, sign among so many that life has done with me. Nay, I know full well I am not old in years, scarce double thine own; but the vital spring is dying. Listen, Harry, you are a man; I have a trust to lay upon you. Since that terrible dawn, when, crying out, ‘Diana’s dead!’ you fell, bleeding of your old wound, into swoon upon swoon, and thereafter into mortal sickness, you

know her name has never passed your lips nor mine. It was better, in sooth, you should believe her dead."

The young man caught at the parapet behind him for support; and the sweat broke on the father's brow as he looked at him. There was a tense silence. Then, fiercely, Harry Rockhurst said:—

"Now, my lord, you must speak!"

A moment longer Rockhurst kept silence. Curious reversal of the wheel of fate! Here stood he, who had always been as a god to his son, now as one in the dock before his judge. He, Rockhurst, whose will the King himself could not bend, ordered to speech; and because of his own just mind, just through all injustice wrought, unresentful—aye, submissive. The moment of agony of a little while ago had passed.

Already it seemed to him the things of life were receding so quickly that he looked on them from afar. Passion had gone from his voice as he spoke; only a mighty sadness was left.

"It was even to speak, Harry, that I kept thee by me here. Know, then, that until the night of Lady Chillingburgh's death,—the night which found Diana without a shelter,—in my daily intercourse with your promised bride the father was ever stronger

in me than the man. Aye, and when her brother fled from the plague-stricken house and there was none but me to protect her (for her kinsman Lionel was, as thou hast good cause to know, my poor wounded boy, no guardian for thy bride) 'twas as a father I cared for her all through the livelong night as we wandered, vainly seeking a refuge. I brought her at length to my house, and went forth to seek the means of conveying her home. That was even the very morning of your arrival. Alack, nor horse nor man could fugitive then find in the waste of the doomed city! I came back to her. . . . Oh, my son, before you judge me, remember: men knew not what they did those terrible days. Question any who passed through them. Staid citizens became drunken reprobates, greybeards rioted horribly with the madness of youth, priests denied their God —”

“But Diana, Diana —”

“Aye, Diana! I deemed Fate itself had given her to me. The madness of the horror about me had turned my brain. Madness of my love for her, of my long self-denial! I would have wedded her, even that hour. But she, she had yielded her troth to thee . . . to thy father she gave her scorn! At that most cursed moment thy voice rose from the street, thou, my son whom I deemed far away, in the heart of the

country! I would have killed her rather than yield her. Remember, I was mad. I thrust her from thy sight into an inner room. Ah, God, in that room!"

"In that room?"

"The plague lay in wait for her."

"The plague —"

"Unknown to me one lay there, a woman who had crept in, sick — to die!"

Harry gave a deep groan, covered his face with his hands, and fell upon the bench.

"Whilst I lay raving, did she die of the plague, there, in your room? O my Diana!"

"My son, I know not. When I sought for her she was gone, vanished. The window was opened into the garden. The woman lay dead upon the bed."

Harry sprang to his feet, clapped his hands together in a sudden agony of joy, more dreadful at that moment than all his sorrow to the father's eyes.

"She escaped? She may be living yet! There is mercy in heaven!"

"No mercy for such as I — nor for thee, being my son. For my moment's madness, what retribution! Harry, this whole long year I have looked for her, night and day. There is not a corner of the town we have not scoured, old Chitterley and myself. Aye, that was the mystery you fretted not to share!"

Harry looked at his father speechlessly, with fierce dry eyes.

"Alas!" Rockhurst went on stonily, "she must even be dead, stricken by the contagion — fallen at the street corner perchance, swept into the common pit as so many others! And yet, if she were not dead — There is not a burning house I pass but I fear she may be in the flames. Food is as ashes, drink as gall upon my tongue. And now, with the presage of death upon me, I lay the hideous burden upon thee, my son, my innocent son!"

He stretched his hand. But, drawing back, the latter turned a red glance upon him.

"And you let me believe her dead that morning — that morning! I could have saved her!" He flung his arms in the air and shook them; a terrible menace on his face.

"God!" he called, "God —!"

Rockhurst gave a loud cry: —

"My son, do not curse your father!"

The young man's arms dropped by his side. He looked at the bent white head, at the countenance worn, wan, patient; then he cast himself upon his father's breast, sobbing: —

"God help us all!"



Harry gave a deep groan, covered his face with his hands, and fell upon the bench.



Night was falling apace. Father and son sat together over the supper table. The meal, such as it was, was over; each had made a pretence at eating, lest he add to the other's burden. In silence Harry's eyes ever sought his father, striving to reconcile the man he had known and revered above all manhood with the man who had harmed him to the shattering of his life. Yet he could now find nothing in his heart but a deeper tenderness. Nay, as he gazed at the noble silvered head, the countenance, beautiful, diaphanous, it was with no jot of reverence abated, rather a kind of awe added to a climbing apprehension. His own words of that terrible moment of revelation rang in his ears as a tolling bell: "*Father! You are all I have left!*"

At last he rose and went restlessly to the open window. When he looked up, there was the pure sky overhead with a star or two, very peaceful; and when he looked forth between the towers, there raged the flames, yonder hung the murk the blacker for the fire lurid below. It seemed an image of his own life.

"At least there can be peace," he told himself.

The door opened behind him; he heard Chitterley's shuffling feet, and next the quavering voice;

but, lost in his contemplation, he never turned his head.

“Harry!” came Lord Rockhurst’s voice of a sudden.

The young man leaped at his tone. Rockhurst thrust a crumpled sheet into his hand.

“Read it, Harry! A messenger has brought it, hotfoot, and is gone as he came.”

As he spoke, the Lord Constable strode to the door.

“Ho there!” he called to the sentinel in the passage. “Call out the guard! Have the assembly sounded!”

His voice rang out, clarion clear. Harry, holding the paper, stared, astounded; the old fire had come back to his father’s eye, the old life to his step; under the very whiteness of his locks his face looked young again.

“Read, lad, read!” ordered Rockhurst, “and be in readiness.”

His step was already clanking down the stone stairs ere his son, hurrying to the window, could read the sheet in the waning light. Then a great cry broke from the young man: “Diana! Diana!”

“My lord (so ran the hasty writing on the note),
“the convent of St. Helen’s, Bishopgate, within where

my kinswoman, Madam Anastasia Bedingfield, has given me shelter, though none of her faith, is even now attacked by the rabble; and we are in parlous danger. Send succour, as you still remember poor Diana !”

From below was heard the roll of drum; then the tramp of feet and the clank of firelock. And over all the Lord Constable’s voice : —

“Steady, lads, and haste. We’ve urgent work to-night !”

Hurriedly Harry set out to join them. His knees trembled as he went. He thought, in the confusion of his mind : My father goeth like a young man again to the rescue, and I like an old one. What will happen between us when we see Diana again?

III

THE LAST COMMAND

TEN frightened ladies, of various ages and comeliness, were gathered round the Mother Abbess in the great stone refectory of St. Helen's House. Queen Catherine's convent — removed since the subsidence of the great sickness from its original home in St. Martin's Lane — was thus far outside the track of the fire, yet the "Blue Nuns" jostled one another like so many frightened children, each in the endeavour to get the closer to the large, firm comfort of her presence. Adown the long table, between the platters of untouched food, burned the four candles in high brazen candlesticks, scantily illumining the room.

The atmosphere was oppressively close, for all the windows were shuttered and barred. And, save for the whimpering of some of the nuns, the mouthing prayerful whispers of others, there was a heavy stillness within, in contrast to the sounds that beat round the walls without : the voice of a mob in a fury.

A husky roar it was, that grew and fell like the waves of the sea. Anon a deep shout or a shrill cry, a shot or a clang, pierced high; anon the thunder of blows at the main doors, echoing through the old house.

As a knock angrier than the rest shook the very foundations, the women raised a wail. Madam Anastasia, the Abbess, looked round them, a certain twist of humour belying the sternness of her face.

“O mother, mother!” shrilly lamented the youngest novice, “shall we all be murdered?”

“Well, and what of that?” quoth the stout daughter of the Bedingfields. “Do we not lay down our lives, in taking convent vows? — Fie, child, Mary Veronica!” Her steady tones began to dominate the thin plaints. “And you, clamouring as you were, but a week ago, to be one of the faithful virgins! Daughters, is this our faith? And, besides, are we not under her Majesty’s special protection, and help sent for? To the chapel with ye, and sing complines. Tut! Have I given permission to break the rules? ’Tis past the hour. Off with ye!”

She rose, hustling them with gestures of her great hanging sleeves, in good-humoured yet irresistible authority. Not one attempted protest, though the smallest novice halted on the threshold to fling a

supplicating look which begged piteously for the shelter of the motherly skirts. But the kind steel-grey eye was relentless; and, shivering, the neophyte pattered after her sisters.

Madam Anastasia watched them depart with a shrug of her ample shoulders. Then as she stood, in deep reflection, by the open door, hearkening to the increasing menace, there came the faint tinkle of the chapel bell; and thereafter the uplifted voices of her nuns chanting, dismally enough, but yet sufficiently in unison. She nodded to herself, with a shrewd smile, and was about to gather her long blue skirts together, preparatory to a survey of the defences, when there came the sound of steps along the flags and the figure of the convent guest moved into her view. The Abbess's face brightened.

"Hither, child!" she beckoned, as Mistress Diana Harcourt, bowing her veiled head, was about to pass on to the chapel.

The young woman approached, flinging back the folds from her face. Against the black filmy frame, her hair, even in the dimness of the corridor, took marvellous brightness as of copper and gold. Her countenance shone with a pearl-like fairness; it was wan, as by long vigils; sad were her eyes, as

though from secret tears; but serenity enveloped her as fragrance does the rose.

Her kinswoman surveyed her an instant with favour. Then she plunged into her huge hanging pocket.

“This letter, flung in through a window, tied to a stone; I had nigh forgotten it! ’Tis addressed to you. Had you been of my flock, ’twas my duty to have read it.”

Diana glanced at the superscription, announced coldly that it was from their kinsman, Lionel Ratcliffe, and proceeded to burst the seal. But the colour welled to her pale cheeks, and she gave a cry of indignation as she read:—

“A man’s patience is not eternal. You have forbidden me sight of you, this month past. My offence — the constancy of my love! You will not, so you tell me, out of your papist cage. Yester-eve our kinswoman threatened me that you would change your religion and take the vows. You have reckoned without me, without the anger of the people. ’Tis the cry that the papists have fired London; I care not, false or true. But no papist shall help to rob me of you! Here is my chance, and I shall seize it. I saved you once, in spite of yourself; now, Diana, I shall save you again from yourself. Have

no fear, though every stone in the walls that keep you from me be laid low, no harm shall come to you. I shall be there, and with friends. So you are warned; be wise, bid our obstinate old Coz Anastasia yield you peacefully, unbar the doors, facilitate the search for the papers we come to seek, and I will even do still what may be done for her safety and that of all her silly pack.

"If this findeth you open to reason, see that she hang a white cloth from the window over the porch, and soon after unbar the gate. And leave the rest to your faithful and ever-loving cousin,

"LIONEL RATCLIFFE."

"And he of our blood! Shame!" cried the Abbess, with hot cheeks.

"Mother," said Diana, and her lip trembled in spite of her brave tone, "had you not best yield, even as he says? Alack! 'tis by bringing peril on you I repay your shelter!"

"Yield you up? A pretty thought! I would rather we all perished together 'neath the stones of the old house. Yield and facilitate, forsooth! Nay, we will even hold the place bolt and bar. An our message have reached the Tower, 'twill go hard with us if the gates do not stand till succour comes.

How, hand thee over to yon infamous wretch, who useth the extremity of the city, the blind folly of the mob, the helplessness of a poor house of gentlewomen, to the furthering of his own base purposes! As for my threat that you would take the vows,"—she gave a dry chuckle,—“I’ve overshot the mark, it seems. I deemed to show thee as out of reach of his pursuit. Well, ’tis ill talking when so much is a-doing. Hark ye at that, ’tis the fiercest onslaught yet. Get thee to the chapel. I must to the outer hall.”

“Nay,” quoth Diana, “I go with you.”

The two kinswomen looked at each other for a second with a mutual pride; then, without further word, they went together to the great outer hall, reverberating now to its vaulted roof as hammer strokes fell upon the iron-studded door.

The stolid, elderly red-headed porter came forth from a deep embrasure,—where he had been philosophically, it seemed, listening to the progress of the attack,—and with a hand on each arm drew them in their turn into the shelter out of reach of stone and shots.

“Will the door hold, think you, Bindon?” asked his reverend mistress, briskly.

“Aye,” quoth Bindon, “good iron, stout oak!—So they lay not gunpowder.”

"And so they do, what then?"

Bindon lifted his hand in slight but expressive gesture. Then his small eye rolled from the old face to the young.

"Eh, but ye be two brave women — not a blanch, not a squeak!"

"Sho!" said the Abbess, with a tolerant smile. "And why should I fear death? Have I not been dead these forty years?"

"And why should I fear death," said Diana's young voice, "since life has naught left for me?"

"I hope you'll not be taken at your word, ladies," said Bindon, with the familiarity of long service. "Nay, look you, I'm none so ready myself! But," he went on, "I like not this pause without: there may be gunpowder in it. And by your leave, I'll creep round to the lookout. Eh, 'tis time the guards should arrive, in faith!"

As his burly figure had moved out of sight, Madam Anastasia turned with some asperity: —

"Indeed, Mistress Harcourt, I marvel at you! Life nothing left for you, forsooth? Tut, tut! Is not the best part of it before you? What have you done with your good youth, answer me that — not even borne a soul to God's service?"

"Why, mother," Diana exclaimed, and the tears

sprang to her eyes. "Do you know my history, and chide me? Oh, I am dead, and this is my tomb. And truly, 'tis best so; since, when I lived in the world, I brought — God knows unwittingly — dire sorrow on two noble hearts that loved me."

The Abbess thrust her hands impatiently up her big sleeves.

"Tush, child! Shouldst have made thy choice boldly. And he whom you had left of the two would be no worse off than now. This shilly-shally likes me not. In a convent, and no nun! A lovely, free woman, and no wife! Either wed or pray, say I. Nay, my dear, though I threatened your cousin with it, I have known it long: your vocation is not with us! With the blessing of God, I'll yet give the house a feast on the day of Mistress Harcourt's wedding with my Lord Rockhurst's son!"

The renewal of clamour without, the report of a musket, the shattering of a few more panes of glass in the high windows, all but drowned the valiant woman's words. Yet Diana had caught the drift of them, and clasped the stout shoulders in sudden embrace.

"Wedding! 'Tis more like we feast with death this day!"

"Why, then, 'tis the best feast of all," cried the Abbess, petulantly.

There came three measured, emphatic blows upon the door. Then, above the loud, continuous howl of the mob, a ringing call : —

"Stand back, there within, stand back for your lives ! We now blow your door in. — Stand back !"

"'Tis Cousin Lionel's voice," whispered Diana, with white lips.

"Sho !" returned the old lady, with great contempt. She caught Diana by the shoulder and dragged her to the entrance of the passage, where she paused, panting, being somewhat weighty for such swift movements. Bindon, trailing a musket, clattered in their rear.

"Aye, truly," she said to him, "I begin to think this may be the end. Tut ! Where lag those sluggard guards ? Sho ! Here now come my silly children ! — Well, well, Sister Magdalen, my pastoral staff ! So we have visitors we shall receive in state."

She took the crook from the hands of the nun ; then, waving back the community, terrified now even to speechlessness : —

"Back to your stalls, daughters ! Shame on you ! Shall not the shepherd come when he pleases, and shall he find the sheep dispersed ? "

She rang her staff threateningly on the flags, and the fluttering bevy fled back to the chapel. "Sheep, indeed — poor things!" chuckled the Abbess.

She was chuckling still when the thud of the explosion came.

It seemed to lift the stone house about them, to make the solid flags heave under their feet. For one instant Diana deemed that they all had been blown in pieces as well as the convent; and, opening her eyes after a reeling moment, was considerably astonished to find herself whole and sound. Before her, in stout equilibrium, was the Abbess, jubilantly chanting a psalm; beside her, Bindon on one knee, poising his firelock. The words he was breathing were not those of prayer.

There was a burst of wailing from the chapel within. Through the porch a wall of white smoke rolled up in swirls.

"They've made the breach; the door is down," said Bindon, superfluously.

The vapour parted. Three men were seen cautiously advancing; beyond them, confusedly, in the ragged breach, Diana caught a glimpse of the street and a crowd of begrimed faces, in brutal exultation, brutal lust of destruction. Ravening as wild beasts behind bars, something yet seemed to

hold them back. The next instant, as she recognised Lionel, she knew whose power at once excited and restrained the mob. Waving his sword, he advanced, scarce a fold out of place in his handsome suit, plumed hat on his head, the red curls of his great wig hanging ordered on either side of the long, pale face.

Their eyes met; she saw the gleam in his, and her heart turned sick. The two that strode behind him were dark-visaged, sinister enough, yet had something of the same air, as of men decorously carrying through a necessary act of violence.

Lionel Ratcliffe halted a pace in front of his old kinswoman and swept an ironical bow. There was no flinching of shame in him as he met the stern challenge of her eye.

"Out of my way, madam," he cried. "I'm not here to deal with you. You've not chosen to take my warning; take your lot. My business is with my cousin here, whom you unlawfully detain. — Diana, I have seen to your safety."

He made an almost imperceptible gesture of his hand as he concluded. The two men darted forward. Hideous confusion instantly sprang up. Diana remembered (and afterward it was with tender laughter) seeing the Mother Abbess strike out right

lustily with her pastoral staff; to such good purpose, indeed, that Lionel's sword was snapped at mid-blade as he tried to parry her blow. At the same instant there was a deafening report in her ear: Bindon had loosed his musket. The foremost of Ratcliffe's attendants threw up his arms and fell forward. Then she felt herself grasped, and knew the hated touch.

"Diana, are you mad?" Lionel was whispering fiercely. "'Tis life or death! . . . If you are seen to struggle now, you, whom this rabble believes I come to rescue from the papists, you are lost, even as the others!"

Through Lionel's words she was aware of the wild-beast roar, execrating:—

"Kill the papists! Burn them! Fire the convent — fire for fire!"

She was aware also of the invisible bars broken down, of the rush. And next, even to her bewildered senses, there came the feeling of a change, a halt.

It was like a flood at full tide miraculously arrested. Shots followed each other in rapid succession outside; and other sounds now, a roll of drums, words of command, some cheers, began to mingle with those hideous recurrent yells. The throng that struggled to pour in through the broken door recoiled.

“The guards! the guards are on us!” was now the cry.

And with the curious unanimity of crowds general panic succeeded general fury. Above the torrential sound of feet on the pavement, a voice, clear yet panting, like the blast of a running trumpeter, rose ever nearer.

“Make way, in the King’s name!”

Then Diana heard the Abbess’s “*Deo gratias*”; heard Lionel curse as his grasp relaxed; heard him curse again as he leaped forward, brandishing the stump of his sword, and, in vain frenzy, striving to stop the fugitives.

Harry Rockhurst was the first of the rescuers to dash through the gaping door. The Lord Constable had in truth reached the gateway before him, but had stood aside to let his son pass. Bare-headed, his black curls flying, his face set with the sternness of fierce intent, Diana for one delirious instant took the son for the father — the father as she had first met him in pride of noble strength, when she had loved him, unbidden. And as he sprang toward her, crying out in accents of unmeasurable joy, “Diana — safe!” she cast herself into his arms.

Now, even as he held her, she knew who it was, knew that there was youth in his pressure, an un-

hampered ecstasy of leaping blood. But yet she clung to him the closer, past and present so inextricably mingled in her thought that all she felt, all she cared to know, was that now, here, her heart had come home at last !

The inner circle of their joy lasted but the moment of a radiant bubble. About them the turmoil still raged. There was one, within a few yards, white-haired, grappling with a furious blood-stained ruffian. Diana clutched her lover's arm.

“Harry, Harry, save the old man !”

Harry turned, saw, and fired his pistol point-blank in the rioter's face. In the same instant, with a horror that stifled the cry of warning in her throat, Diana saw Lionel, with livid countenance of fury, advancing upon the young man, his broken sword drawn back like a dagger for the thrust. But even as she found voice, all was over : one whose love had been swifter than hers had flung himself between the steel and its aim. Then all was a swirl of confusion. She saw Harry draw his sword from Lionel's fallen body, fling it from him, and rush with a deep cry of anguish to the tall, white-headed man who yet stood erect, smiling, but with a face of terrible pallor.

She looked again ; and, as if the blast of a mighty

wind had torn the mists from her eyes, she knew him. The old man she had called him: it was Lord Rockhurst himself.

And now it became clear to her that he was wounded, and grievously. Though he still stood, he was supported on one side by his son; on the other by a grey-bearded yeoman who, seeing his leader struck, had worked his way to him with great strides, through the mob of soldiers and rioters struggling at the door.

"Sir," he was saying, "this is the weight of a dead man."

"Ah, no!" cried the son. "For God's sake, look to the wound! O God!—the sword, to the very hilt!"

Rockhurst came back from his far-smiling contemplation to forbid the hand that would have plucked the broken sword from his side.

"Touch it not yet, Sergeant Bracy. When you draw it, you draw my life with it."

"He's sped, Master Harry," whispered Bracy, and his face began to work.

Then Rockhurst failed in their arms and they gently laid him down on the flags, but a few paces away from Lionel Ratcliffe's dead body. As in a dream,

Diana came and knelt by his side. Madam Anastasia was praying under her voice the prayer for the dying: “. . . Remember not, O Lord, the offences of thy servant, and take not revenge of his sins. . . .”

“Oh, father,” sobbed Harry, “the best, the dearest ! Oh, my honoured lord !”

The dying man, as with an effort, brought his far gaze to the two young faces bending in sorrow over him.

“It is well,” he said, “very well. Diana, lay your hand in his. I would fain place it there myself, but I cannot, I cannot.” His eye roamed as if seeking. Once again he smiled at Bracy’s distraught countenance.

“Old comrade,” he breathed, “pluck out the blade.”

The Lord Constable had given his last command.





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